‘Proficiscere, anima Christiana’: Gerontius and German mysticism

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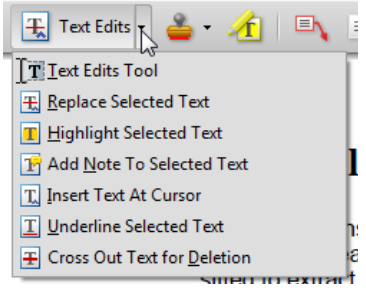

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'Proficiscere, anima Christiana': *Gerontius* and German Mysticism

AIDAN THOMSON

Gerontius in Germany

THE première of Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*, which took place in Birmingham Town Hall on 3 October 1900, was, famously, a disaster. A combination of events – the death on 11 June of the chorus master, Charles Swinnerton Heap, his replacement by a musically unsympathetic veteran, W. C. Stockley, and the absence of printed parts before August – conspired to aggravate the rehearsal of a score that, by the standards of contemporary English oratorio, was particularly demanding.[1] The result was a performance which prompted Elgar's friend Rosa Burley to comment that 'the chorus did not know the parts they were trying to sing', and in which one of the soloists, Harry Plunket Greene, sang a semitone out of tune from the Angel of the Agony scene to the end of the work.[2] There was no lack of sympathy for Elgar among the British press, many of whom were as quick to praise the new work as they were to censure its performance. But the effect of the Birmingham debacle was immediate, for Sir August Manns cancelled a performance scheduled to take place at the Crystal Palace on 27 October. *Gerontius* was not performed again in Britain, at least in full, until 11 September 1902, almost two years after the première, as part of the Three Choirs Festival at Worcester.[3]

By then, the work had enjoyed success elsewhere. A performance of *Gerontius* by the Civic Music Society in Düsseldorf on 19 December 1901 won Elgar much critical acclaim and, in the minds of some local German critics, established him as the leading British composer of his generation.[4] This led to a second Düsseldorf performance on

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[1] Lewis Foreman, 'Elgar and *Gerontius*: The Early Performances', *The Best of Me: A Gerontius Centenary Companion*, ed. Geoffrey Hodgkins (Rickmansworth, 1999), 162–235 (pp. 168, 173).

[2] Rosa Burley and Frank C. Carruthers, *Edward Elgar: The Record of a Friendship* (London, 1972), 142, quoted in Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1987), 331; Mrs Richard Powell [Dora Penny], 'The First Performance of "Gerontius"', *Musical Times*, 100 (1959), 78–9.

[3] Foreman, 'Elgar and *Gerontius*', 182, 186–7. There was a performance in Worcester on 9 May 1901 under the composer, but it did not include the Demons' Chorus. For some of the British critical reaction to the première, see Moore, *Edward Elgar*, 331–4, and 'The Birmingham Première', *The Best of Me*, ed. Hodgkins, 123–55.

[4] See the reviews in the *Düsseldorfer Zeitung* and *Düsseldorfer Volksblatt*, trans. David Mason, quoted in Foreman, 'Elgar and *Gerontius*', 192, 198.

19 May 1902, as part of the Lower Rhine Music Festival, after which Richard Strauss famously toasted Elgar as the 'first English progressivist'.[5] Lewis Foreman is surely correct when he writes that while these two performances had not 'single-handedly demonstrated the stature of *Gerontius* [. . .] there [could] be no doubt of the impact of the music at Düsseldorf, or the influence it had in both countries'.[6] In Britain, *Gerontius* became a pillar of the main choral festivals almost overnight: the work was performed 14 times in England and Scotland in 1903 alone, and its popularity with audiences was rivalled only by Handel's *Messiah* and Mendelssohn's *Elijah*.[7] Admittedly, this popularity was not universal. A number of Protestant clergymen felt that the Catholic theology underpinning Cardinal Newman's poem rendered it unsuitable for performance in Anglican cathedrals; thus *Gerontius* was heard in Worcester Cathedral only with textual alterations, and not at all in Gloucester Cathedral until 1910.[8] For conservative music critics, the Wagnerian idiom of Elgar's score, a new departure for English oratorio, was no less problematic. In *fin de siècle* Britain, Wagner had become associated with the so-called 'decadent' movement, which had fallen into disrepute following the conviction of Oscar Wilde in 1895; for the fact that *Gerontius* owed as much as it did to *Parsifal* – a work whose frequently febrile atmosphere made it in some ways *the* quintessential decadent music drama – permitted some critics to view Elgar's work as morally suspect.[9]

[5] Foreman, 'Elgar and *Gerontius*', 205.

[6] *Ibid.*, 188.

[7] *Ibid.*, 187; Herbert Thompson, 'The English Autumn Provincial Festivals', *Zeitschrift der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft* (hereafter *ZIMG*), 5/4 (January 1904), 173. Thompson noted the near identity of the attendance figures for the three oratorios at the 1903 Three Choirs Festival at Hereford: 2,130 for *Gerontius*, 2,129 for *Elijah* and 2,128 for *Messiah*.

[8] Robert Anderson, *Elgar* (London, 1993), 54; Byron Adams, 'Elgar's Later Oratorios: Roman Catholicism, Decadence and the Wagnerian Dialectic of Shame and Grace', *The Cambridge Companion to Elgar*, ed. Daniel M. Grimley and Julian Rushton (Cambridge, 2004), 81–105 (p. 87, n. 26); Charles Edward McGuire, 'Measure of a Man: Catechizing Elgar's Catholic Avatars', *Edward Elgar and his World*, ed. Byron Adams (Princeton, NJ, 2007), 3–37 (p. 6). The clerics had support from conservative critics like Charles Maclean, according to whom 'a modern poem with its direct imagery does introduce and accentuate feelings of theological difference, which ancient words in Latin, become almost a formula, do not; and if the clergy are in earnest, they could not possibly allow the drama of "Gerontius" to be acted in its ipsissima verba before their eyes and giving the sanction of the Protestant church-building for which they are in trust'. See Charles Maclean, 'Notizien', 'Worcester', *ZIMG*, 4/1 (October 1902), 31–2 (p. 31). For more on the often mixed reception of Catholic oratorios, and *Gerontius* in particular, in Britain, see Maria McHale, 'A Singing People: English Vocal Music and Nationalist Debate, 1880–1920' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of London, 2003), Chapter 2 ('Oratorio and the Choral Tradition'), 102–60, esp. pp. 125–42.

[9] Emma Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism in the 1890s* (Oxford, 2002); Adams, 'Elgar's Later Oratorios', esp. pp. 83–93. The connection between *Parsifal* and *Gerontius* has long been recognized (Adams, 'Elgar's Later Oratorios', 86–7); the pejorative form that this could take is exemplified by Ernest Walker, who claimed that Gerontius's profession of faith, 'though sincere, nevertheless suggest[s] an atmosphere of artificial flowers', a choice of metaphor that hints at Act 2 of *Parsifal*. See Ernest Walker, *A History of Music in England* (Oxford, 1907), 306–7, quoted in Aidan J. Thomson, 'Elgar's Critical Critics', *Edward Elgar and his World*, ed. Adams, 193–222 (p. 213).

But for the most part the incorporation of *Gerontius* into the English oratorio canon was unproblematic.

While the Düsseldorf performances have become central to the post-compositional history of *Gerontius*, their centrality is ultimately ancillary; it is less significant that the performances themselves were successful (in the first Düsseldorf concert, Antonie Beel, who sang the Angel, attracted some adverse criticism) than that the positive critical evaluation of the work by German critics prompted hitherto sceptical British audiences to embrace the piece wholeheartedly. In other words, the critical success in Germany may be portrayed as having served as a means to an end (the incorporation of *Gerontius* into the English choral repertory) rather than as being interesting in its own right. Yet this remarkably Anglocentric perspective leaves much unsaid. What caused German audiences, and therefore presumably German critics, to respond so positively to *Gerontius*? In particular, how did German critics react to the religiosity of Elgar's piece, especially if we consider that *Parsifal* had yet to be performed outside Bayreuth?

To date, the most significant attempt to address this question, in relation to German-speaking lands if not to Germany itself, has been Sandra McColl's appraisal of the critical reaction to the Viennese première of *Gerontius* on 16 November 1905. Many Viennese critics were unimpressed by Newman's text, whether on theological or dramatic grounds (or both), but most were positive about Elgar's music, their reservations being limited to the opening of Part II, which some felt lacked the necessary other-worldliness, and the Demons' Chorus, which was thought too tame.[10] On the other hand, it is reasonable to assume that these critics were not starting from a blank slate; they might well have been familiar with the work from one or other of the Düsseldorf performances, or at least with the response to them, and might even have seen the (by now) published score. For this reason it makes sense to consider earlier German responses to *Gerontius*, and to Elgar in general, particularly those in explicitly musical journals, which had the space to examine the subject in depth. Foremost among these are the articles written by Max Hehemann for *Die Musik*

[10] Sandra McColl, '*Gerontius* in the City of Dreams: Newman, Elgar, and the Viennese Critics', *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 32 (2001), 47–64. The critics who admired the work most were Richard Wallaschek in *Die Zeit*, who saw 'the national music [. . .] of the German people as potentially lying in the massed choral-orchestral festivals that were a feature of German life at the time' (quoted in McColl, *op. cit.*, 48), and Maximilian Muntz in the *Deutsche Zeitung* (a Christian Socialist paper). Those who disliked it most were Hedwig von Friedländer-Abel in the *Montags-Revue*, who found the text 'saccharine' and Elgar's setting of it 'artificial, cluttered, contrivedly simple' (quoted in McColl, *op. cit.*, 54, 60); David Josef Bach in the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* (a socialist paper); and Robert Hirschfeld in the *Wiener Abendpost*, who thought Elgar's setting too operatic for a religious work. The leading Viennese critics, Julius Korngold (*Neue Freie Presse*) and Max Kalbeck (*Neues Wiener Tagblatt*), were moderately pro- and anti-*Gerontius* respectively; both disliked the text but, for the most part, praised Elgar's setting of it.

(1903) and *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (1905), by Otto Neitzel for *Signale für die musikalische Welt* (1902), and by Fritz Volbach for the *Allgemeine Musikzeitung* (1904). To these may also be added a later, slightly longer article that Volbach wrote in 1907 for the Catholic journal *Hochland*, partly because the views he expresses therein about *Gerontius* are unlikely to differ greatly from those that he held three years earlier, and partly because the theological parallels he draws are somewhat more detailed than the reviews in the purely musical periodicals – a reflection, perhaps, of his awareness of *Hochland*'s readership.[11] It is hard to be sure how representative these articles were of wider critical opinion in Germany, but the fact that in most cases they appeared several years after the Düsseldorf performances of *Gerontius* would seem to indicate enduring interest either in the work or in its composer.

An examination of these writers' critical reactions to *Gerontius* reveals two recurring features: an attempt to connect Elgar's work with Richard Strauss's tone poem *Tod und Verklärung* (1890) and an interest in the work's relationship to mysticism. The connection with Strauss is hardly surprising, given the aftermath of the second Düsseldorf concert, but the significance of that event should not be underestimated; as a contemporary composer whose pre-eminence was taken for granted in Britain by liberal and conservative critics alike, Strauss's words carried a great deal of authority in the right circles.[12] More important, however, is the fact that, partly as a consequence of Germany's musical hegemony in the late nineteenth century, and of the transcendental aesthetics associated with it, great German music had become synonymous in the minds of many German and British critics with

[11] Max Hehemann, 'Edward Elgar', *Die Musik*, 2/7 (January 1903), 15–25, and *idem*, 'Edward Elgar', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 72/40 (27 September 1905), 760–2; Otto Neitzel, 'Zwei "Urneuheiten": Elgar's "Traum des Gerontius" und Reznicek's "Till Eulenspiegel"', *Signale für die musikalische Welt*, 60/10 (29 January 1902), 145–8; Fritz Volbach, 'Die "Apostel" von Edward Elgar', *Allgemeine Musikzeitung*, 31/51 (16 December 1904), 849–50, continued in *Allgemeine Musikzeitung*, 31/52 (23 December 1904), 869–70, and *idem*, 'Edward Elgar', *Hochland*, 5/1 (December 1907), 316–21. Volbach's perspective may also have been consolidated by his personal friendship and correspondence with Elgar; see Walther Volbach, 'Edward and Fritz Volbach', *Musical Opinion*, 60 (1937), 870–2. For more on these critics, see Aidan J. Thomson, 'Elgar in German Criticism', *The Cambridge Companion to Elgar*, ed. Grimley and Rushton, 204–13.

[12] Among early twentieth-century British critics, Alfred Kalisch described Strauss as 'the greatest, if not the only great force in the music of to-day, and destined to have a permanent and prominent place in the history of music', while Maclean, much though he was appalled by the plots of both *Salome* and *Der Rosenkavalier*, described Strauss as the 'greatest of living musicians'. See Alf[red] K[alisch], 'Musikberichte', 'London', *ZIMG*, 4/10 (July 1903), 626–7 (p. 627); Charles Maclean, 'Music and Morals', *ZIMG*, 8/12 (September 1907), 461–4 (p. 462); and C[harles] M[aclean], 'London Notes', *ZIMG*, 14/5 (February 1913), 138–9 (p. 138).

great music in general.[13] For Elgar to be endorsed by the arbiters, as it were, of universal musical taste, was for him to be assigned a place in 'universal' (for which read 'German') music history; for *Gerontius* to become a choral classic alongside *Elijah* was thus no less than it merited. But we should also note Hehemann's remark that 'since Professor Buths performed the "Dream of Gerontius" in the German language for the first time in Düsseldorf on 19th December 1901, Elgar is entitled to live *as one of us*'.[14] For Hehemann, at least, Elgar's universality was predicated in his Germanness.

The specific connection with *Tod und Verklärung*, however, is more intriguing. Although Elgar may have seen the score of Strauss's tone poem by the time he wrote *Gerontius*, he certainly did not hear it in concert until June 1902, and never gave any indication subsequently that he had been influenced by it.[15] Nevertheless, the superficial similarity between the two pieces – both begin with the death of a mortal and trace the spiritual journey of a soul – prompted some critics to compare them. For instance, Neitzel, the music critic of the *Kölnische Zeitung*, was certain that *Gerontius* was

> called into life directly or indirectly by the example of Richard Strauss, a proof of how widely this live wire of new musical ideas [. . .] is stirring up the musical water. Certainly

[13] A blatant example of this point of view can be found in Hugo Riemann, 'Schluss', 'Musikgeschichte', §222 of *Das goldene Buch der Musik*, ed. Karl Grunsky *et al.* (Berlin and Stuttgart, 1900); note particularly Riemann's implicit universalizing in his references to 'real art' and 'for all countries': 'The complete picture of the musical world at the end of the century shows that Germany's musical supremacy over all countries that cultivate real art continues with unabated strength. [. . .] For all countries, the "greats" are German masters: Bach, Handel, Gluck, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Weber, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Wagner and Brahms. For one or other of one's own nationality to be equated with these greats is the highest thing to which the pride of other nations aspires' ('Das Gesamtbild der musikalischen Welt am Schlusse des Jahrhunderts zeigt die noch mit ungeschwächter Kraft fortdauernde musikalische Suprematie Deutschlands über alle Länder, welche überhaupt die rechte Kunst pflegen. [. . .] die "Grossen" sind für alle Lande die deutschen Meister Bach, Händel, Gluck, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Weber, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Wagner und Brahms. Diesen Grossen einen oder den andern der eigenen Nationalität gleichzustellen, ist das Höchste, wozu sich der Stolz der anderen Nationen erhebt'). Hubert Parry's *Studies of Great Composers* (7th edn, London, 1902) focuses on almost exactly the same composers as Riemann; of these, only Gluck and Brahms are not the subjects of individual chapters, and Palestrina is the sole non-German/Austrian.

[14] Hehemann, 'Edward Elgar' (1905), 761: 'Seitdem Prof. Buths in Düsseldorf am 19. Dez. 1901 den "Traum des Gerontius" zum ersten Male in deutscher Sprache aufführte, hat Elgar *Heimatrecht bei uns*' (italics added).

[15] Peter Dennison, 'Elgar's Musical Apprenticeship', *Elgar Studies*, ed. Raymond Monk (Aldershot, 1990), 1–34 (pp. 13, 27). In an interview that appeared in *Chicago Inter-Ocean* on 7 April 1907, Elgar expressed his admiration for Strauss's tone poems, but comments about *Tod* are conspicuous by their absence: '"Don Juan" is the greatest masterpiece of the present, and his "Heldenleben" and "Zarathustra" I find almost as inspiring' (quoted in Moore, *Edward Elgar*, 511).

> Elgar's oratorio further extends the range of ideas and circles of emotions that Strauss has struck in his tone poem *Tod und Verklärung*.[16]

Neitzel felt that *Gerontius* formed part of the post-Parsifalian transfigurative Zeitgeist on account of its subject matter: following the Demons' Chorus, Part II of the oratorio resembled 'the manner of the third act of *Parsifal*, only Gerontius is spared the snake-bite of remorse and the neglected good deeds'.[17]

But Neitzel was also conscious of how the oratorio's distinctively Catholic qualities differed from *Tod und Verklärung*, nowhere more so than in how Strauss and Elgar (or at least Newman) dealt with the deaths of their respective protagonists. In *Tod*, dying is a simple 'solemn but short entry into Elysium', the inevitability of which almost suggests secular predestination.[18] We may infer from this that the hero of *Tod* has no doubts about his destination: his earthly actions have spoken for themselves; he has no higher authority before which to answer; thus a short but resounding 'arrival' in the traditionally triumphant key of C major announces his arrival into the pantheon of the immortals.[19] In *Gerontius*, however, dying is painful, protracted and, above all, plagued with uncertainty about the Soul's future. Although Newman 'has guided his hero's last moments completely into the influence of the Catholic faith', that faith continues to vacillate: on the one hand, Gerontius 'summons up renewed powers of resistance from the intercession, which to him is a confirmation of the truth of his faith'; on the other, 'under the influence of the evil spirit appearing to him, he is shaken by a renewed wild fear of death'.[20] Gerontius's utterances,

[16] Neitzel, 'Zwei "Urneuheiten"', 145: '[. . .] dass sie unmittel- oder mittelbar durch Richard Strauß' Vorgang in's [*sic*] Leben gerufen wurden, ein Beweis, wie weit dieser Hecht im musikalischen Karpfenteich [. . .] die musikalischen Wasser aufrührt. Und zwar spinnt das Elgar'sche [*sic*] Oratorium die Gedanken- und Empfindenskreise weiter, die Strauss in seiner Tondichtung "Tod und Verklärung" angeschlagen hat.'

[17] *Ibid.*, 146: 'eine Art "Parsifal" dritter Act, nur daß dem Gerontius der Schlangenbiß der Reue und der versäumten guten Thaten erspart bleibt'.

[18] *Ibid*, 145: 'feierlichen aber kurzen Einzug in's [*sic*] Elysium'. Such predestination was also congruent with nineteenth-century theories of heroism, notably that outlined by Thomas Carlyle, for whom 'Man [was] heaven-born; not the thrall of Circumstances, of Necessity, but the victorious subduer thereof'; see Thomas Carlyle, 'Boswell's Life of Johnson' (1832), *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, 5 vols., The Works of Thomas Carlyle (Centenary Edition), ed. Henry Duff Traill, 26–30 (London, 1896–9), iii (1898), 90, quoted in introduction to Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, notes and introduction by Michael K. Goldberg; text established by Michael K. Goldberg, Joel J. Brattin and Mark Engel (Berkeley, CA, 1993), xxxiv–xxxv.

[19] Strauss may have envisaged himself as the hero of *Tod*. In a letter to Friedrich von Hausegger in 1895 he wrote that he aimed 'to represent the death of a person who had striven for the highest artistic goals, therefore very probably an artist'; see Michael Kennedy, *Strauss Tone Poems*, BBC Music Guide (London, 1984), 22. Moreover, Strauss quotes *Tod* at several points in *Ein Heldenleben*.

[20] Neitzel, 'Zwei "Urneuheiten"', 145–6: 'hat Newman die letzten Augenblicke seines Helden völlig in die Bannkreise des katholischen Glaubens hinübergeführt'; 'schöpft er aus der Fürbitte, die ihm eine Bestätigung seiner Glaubenstreue ist, erneute Widerstandskraft'; 'als ihn, unter dem Einfluß des ihm erscheinenden bösen Geistes, erneute wilde Todesfurcht durchschüttelt'.

however, form only part of the dramatic argument, for his struggle against death, expressed in the declamation of music drama, takes place at the same moment as the prayers of his friends, sung by the chorus and semi-chorus, 'strive to free him' ('zu befreien trachtet') from this evil spirit. These friends are thus active participants in the drama, not just commentators. Theirs is the confirmative voice of authority in the debate raging inside the Soul's head; their *stile antico* singing provides the certainty of faith that the dying Gerontius requires. Nevertheless, the work ends in the ambiguity of purgatory, not the certainty of heaven. It is a far cry from the heroic affirmation of *Tod*.

The difference between Elgar's and Strauss's perspectives of death reflected the difference in their spiritual world-views. As Hehemann put it, 'Strauss's ideal is striven for in this life', whereas

> with Elgar, the music even more than the poetry expresses the desire for the hereafter, and the prayer which the friends of Gerontius dedicate to his departed soul is not a remorseful melancholic plea, but rather a song of triumph for one who has overcome life, and through the gate of death has arrived at everlasting joy.[21]

But, despite drawing this distinction between Elgarian spirituality and Straussian materialism, Hehemann also acknowledged that the subject matter of *Gerontius* was 'generally human material' ('allgemein menschlichen Stoff'), a remark that echoed Elgar's own comment that he imagined Gerontius 'to be a man like us, not a Priest or a Saint, but a *sinner*, a repentant one of course but still no end of a *worldly man* in his life, & now brought to book'. Elgar's work may have possessed a 'peculiar Catholic mysticism' ('eigenartige katholische Mystik'), but it also contained human truths no less than did Strauss's.[22]

While the similarities between *Gerontius* and *Tod und Verklärung* meant that they could both form part of a wider post-Parsifalian discourse on death and transfiguration in Germany, the differences between the two works are considerable on account of the theology that lay at the heart of Elgar's work. In particular, Hehemann's approving reference to Elgar's 'peculiar Catholic mysticism' is echoed by both Neitzel and Volbach in their accounts of the piece. In the remainder of this article, I shall discuss what Hehemann and his fellow critics may have understood by 'mysticism', why it had become an important creative stimulus for artists in late nineteenth-century Germany, and how it manifests itself musically in *Gerontius*. Following a consideration of the tonal planning of the work, and, especially, Elgar's

[21] Hehemann, 'Edward Elgar' (1903), 17: 'Bei Strauss wird das Ideal in diesem Leben erstrebt'; 'bei Elgar spricht die Musik noch mehr wie die Dichtung das Verlangen nach dem Jenseits aus, und das Gebet, das die Freunde des Gerontius seiner abgeschiedenen Seele widmen, ist keine zerknirschte wehmutsvolle Bitte, sondern eher ein Triumphgesang für den, der das Leben überwunden hat und durch die Todespforte eingeht zur ewigen Freude'.

[22] *Ibid.*; letter to August Jaeger, 28 August 1900, in *Elgar and his Publishers: Letters of a Creative Life*, ed. Jerrold Northrop Moore, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1987), i: *1885–1903*, 228.

development of the leitmotif associated with the words 'Novissima hora est' ('It is the last hour'), I suggest that *Gerontius* may best be classified as an epic, rather than a dramatic, oratorio, on account of the fact that the structure of the work suggests two narratives taking place simultaneously and instantaneously – a collapsing of time that is in keeping with the mystical scenario of the piece as a whole.

Mysticism and *Gerontius*

As Roy Pascal has observed, the second half of the nineteenth century in Germany saw a 'decline in the intellectual authority of the church [that] was more thorough [. . .] than elsewhere in Europe and America'. Ironically, this was partly the consequence of a culturally Protestant tradition of critical inquiry that, both in philosophy and in science, had increasingly stripped Christianity of its claims to universal truth. By the era of the Wilhelmine Reich, alternatives to traditional religion had begun to emerge. In some cases, these were explicitly secular organizations, such as the League of Freethinkers, founded in 1881, or the *Komitee Konfessionslos*, which favoured church disestablishment and the freeing of teachers from religious duties.[23] In others, the alternatives took the form of religious systems that combined Christianity with Darwinism, nationalism and other contemporary ideologies (including anti-Semitism), as part of a reaction against modern materialism; these included esoteric movements such as theosophy and anthroposophy (founded by Rudolf Steiner), and *völkisch* movements with racist overtones such as ariosophy and the Christian-Germanic 'religion' pioneered by the eccentric theologian Paul de Lagarde.[24] The scepticism, scientism and rationalism that characterized nineteenth-century German cultural Protestantism thus provoked its own reaction: a longing for salvation ('Erlösung') in a transcendental spirituality that rejected modern materialism. And, as Nietzsche put it, 'when scepticism meets with longing, mysticism is born'.[25]

'Mysticism' – or at least that which was described as 'mystical' – had several meanings in late nineteenth-century Germany. Applied loosely, the word could connote a sense of spirituality or religiosity that was not tied to any particular creed (in other words, 'scepticism [met] with longing'), and which bypassed rationality and conscious thought. As Eduard von Hartmann commented, in a much-reprinted volume, 'the essence of the mystical should be understood as filling consciousness

[23] Roy Pascal, *From Naturalism to Expressionism: German Literature and Society 1880–1918* (London, 1973), 162–3, 166.

[24] For more on Lagarde, see George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York, 1964), 31–9, and Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley, CA, 1974), 35–52. For an overview of the social, cultural, intellectual and artistic reaction to bourgeois modernity in Wilhelmine Germany, see Hagen Schulze, *Germany: A New History*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 176–83.

[25] Quoted in Pascal, *From Naturalism to Expressionism*, 171.

with content (feeling, thought, desiring) through the spontaneous appearance of the same from the unconscious'.[26] But 'mysticism' was more than simply irrational feeling; indeed, within academic theology it had a very specific meaning. This meaning involved the collapse of subject–object (or inner–outer) dualities, to reveal a sense of oneness with the deity. It thus has much in common with Hartmann's definition, but with the important difference that it makes explicit the relationship between the individual and God. As Wilhelm Windelband explained:

> The conceptual principle of mysticism is that mankind appears in his identity with the Godhead. Mankind as micro-deity is the disclosure of all mystery. The soul is God, so far as it recognizes Him – it recognizes Him so far as it is God. But this understanding is an 'inexpressible vision' [. . .]. This idealistic pantheism, which dissolves the outside world into the inner, and the inner world into a blessed vision of God, is the basis of the character of German mysticism.[27]

Windelband's reference to 'the character of German mysticism' reflects the extent to which contemporary mysticism had deep medieval roots. The second half of the nineteenth century saw a revival of interest in the works of the fourteenth-century Rhenish mystics Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) and Heinrich Suso (1295–1366), whose works appeared in new editions and attracted considerable scholarly attention.[28] This Rhenish mysticism was characterized by the idea of at-oneness with God, something that was achieved, in Eckhart's theory, by a process called 'Gelassenheit' ('detachment'). 'Gelassenheit' was effectively a renunciation of the self (in the sense of what one is, rather than what one has): one emptied one's soul so that

[26] Eduard von Hartmann, *Philosophie des Unbewußten*, 8th edn, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1878), i: *Phänomenologie des Unbewußten*, 314, quoted in Jacob Mühlethaler, *Die Mystik bei Schopenhauer* (Berlin, 1910), 80: 'Das Wesen des Mystischen ist zu begreifen als Erfüllung des Bewußtseins mit einem Inhalt (Gefühl, Gedanke, Begehrung) durch unwillkürliches Auftauchen desselben aus dem Unbewußten.'

[27] Wilhelm Windelband, *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie*, 4th edn, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1907), i, §5, 'Die deutsche Mystik', quoted in Mühlethaler, *Die Mystik bei Schopenhauer*, 79: '[. . .] erscheint der Mensch in seiner Identität mit der Gottheit als das Erkenntnisprinzip des Mystizismus. Der Mensch als Mikrotheos ist die Enthüllung aller Rätsel. Die Seele ist soweit Gott, als sie ihn erkennt – sie erkennt ihn soweit, als sie Gott ist. Dies Erkennen aber ist ein "unaussprechliches Anschauen" [. . .]. Dieser idealistische Pantheismus, der die äußere Welt in die innere und die innere Welt in eine selige Gottesanschauung auflöst, ist der Grundcharakter der deutschen Mystik.'

[28] Pascal, *From Naturalism to Expressionism*, 171. The first modern edition of either mystic's work was *Deutsche Mystiker des vierzehnten Jahrhunderts*, ed. Franz Pfeiffer, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1845–57), ii: *Meister Eckhart*. Other editions included Heinrich Suso Denifle, *Die deutschen Schriften des Seligen Heinrich Seuse aus dem Prediger Ordern* (Munich, 1880); Wilhelm Preger, *Ältere und neuere Mystik in der ersten Hälfte des XIV. Jahrhunderts: Heinrich Suso* (Leipzig, 1881); *Meister Eckhart und seine Jünger: Ungedruckte Texte zur Geschichte der deutscher Mystik*, ed. Franz Jostes (Freiburg, 1895); and *Meister Eckharts mystische Schriften*, trans. Gustav Landauer (Berlin, 1903).

it might be filled by God.[29] With the immanent presence of God in the soul, and thus complete union between human and deity, the logical result of Eckhart's theory was the deification of the human being.[30] However, as one of Eckhart's forerunners, Mechthild of Magdeburg (*c.*1207–82), observed, the perception of such a union must occur in the knowing self, the re-emergence of which thus necessitated the breaking of the mystical union, and therefore the loss of God's presence. The suffering that this entailed, Mechthild believed, enabled the mystic to empathize with the suffering undergone by Christ (and by humanity in general), and thereby to come into the presence of divine love again. Consequently, there was a constant oscillation within the soul between the presence and non-presence of God, which, over time, would synthesize into a realization of His omnipresence.[31]

The consequences of 'Gelassenheit' were multifold. For Eckhart's contemporary Marguerite Porete (d. 1310), the soul should aim to live without a 'why'; this was a reflection of a widespread belief, later adopted by Eckhart, that sin existed in the will (i.e. the soul) rather than in the body. (Indeed, Marguerite believed that the will had to be destroyed before mystical union with God was possible.)[32] A still more significant consequence was the view that with mystical union the Son of God was constantly reborn in the soul, which Eckhart described as both 'virgin and wife'.[33] Since mystical union, by its very nature, was a constantly recurring process, the birth of the Son was thus not a one-off event; indeed, since the Son, as part of the Trinity, existed before the Creation, the soul, or at least the part of it that achieved mystical union with God, must be similarly 'uncreated'.[34] In this way, not only did mystical union go beyond normal human thought processes, but, at least in theory, it

[29] Alain de Libera, *Eckhart, Suso, Tauler, ou la divinisation de l'homme* (Paris, 1996), 102, 111. Suso took a similar position to Eckhart: for him there was a need to be 'freed from the forms of creatures, formed with Christ, and transformed in the Godhead'; the 'goal of the truly detached person in all things' was to 'sink away from the self, and with the self all things sink away' (*ibid.*, 118–19; my translations). See also Henry Suso, *The Exemplar, with Two German Sermons*, trans., ed. and with introduction by Frank Tobin, preface by Bernard McGinn (New York, 1989), 184–5, and Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame, IN, 1995), 122ff.

[30] Eckhart even implied this directly, claiming that the 'breakthrough' required to achieve union was a transformation akin to transubstantiation; Suso challenged this position, arguing that however much a human might share Christ's humanity, no union with God could result in that human approaching Christ's divinity. See Libera, *Eckhart, Suso, Tauler*, 176, 182. Suso's refutation of Eckhart's position appears in *The Little Book of Truth*, Chapter 4; see Suso, *The Exemplar*, ed. Tobin, 29–30.

[31] Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 79, 84–5.

[32] *Ibid.*, 116, 27–8. Hollywood discusses the tradition of women identifying with the body more than men did, including in their respective spiritualities. Following the trial and condemnation of Meister Eckhart in 1328, the suffering body again became seen as essential as a means to accessing the divine; see *ibid.*, 75, 95, 101 and 206.

[33] *Ibid.*, 9.

[34] *Ibid.*, 138, 151.

occurred beyond time and space. In doing so, it denied the idea of the diachronic, and of history itself.

The apparent paradoxes and contradictions inherent in mysticism – for instance the impossibility of being aware of one's oneness with God because to be so aware would be to deny that oneness, or the recurrence of events that by their nature existed outside human concepts of time – proved very attractive to late nineteenth-century German intellectuals and artists who had become disillusioned with a modernity that was underpinned by rationality and materialism. In many cases they took their cue from Schopenhauer, who, in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1818, revised 1844), had proposed a means of transcending the destructive desires of humanity, namely self-abnegating asceticism, that owed much to mystical thought – albeit mystical thought in which he 'replaced its religious centre with the idea of a conscious life sustained by the transcendent irrational power of a metaphysical "will"'.[35] This secularization of mystical ideas allowed them to be used creatively by early modernist writers who in some cases were non- or even anti-Christian, such as Rainer Maria Rilke (in his *Stundenbuch*) and Stefan George, and by artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, who, in his 'Über das Geistige in der Kunst', called for painters to 'adopt a mystical view of the world's "inner reality"'.[36] Mysticism was thus not only part of the reaction against modernity but also an essential ingredient of early modernist art.

If mysticism could play an important role in the genesis of early modernist literature and visual art, it almost goes without saying that it could also do so with music, the artistic medium in which Schopenhauer's aesthetic theories perhaps had the most pervasive effect on account of their adoption by Wagner. In Book 3 of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Schopenhauer outlined how the purpose of great art was to communicate universal, Platonic ideas, and how through aesthetic perception and contemplation of these ideas an individual could be raised into a 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge'.[37] The highest of all art forms, Schopenhauer argued, was music, because its non-representational character meant that it was 'by no means like the other arts, the copy of the Ideas, but the *copy of the will itself*, whose objectivity the Ideas are'. Melody thus 'records the most secret history of this

[35] Andrew Weeks, *German Mysticism from Hildegard of Bingen to Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Literary and Intellectual History* (Albany, NY, 1993), 230. Schopenhauer's mystical thinking derived from, among other sources, Buddhism, Eckhart and the sixteenth-/seventeenth-century mystic Jakob Boehme. See also Gerard Mannion, *Schopenhauer, Religion and Morality: The Humble Path to Ethics* (Aldershot, 2003), 77–80.

[36] For examples of such mystically inspired work, see Weeks, *German Mysticism*, 233–5, and Paul R. Mendes Flohr, *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (Detroit, MI, 1991), 80. Other figures inspired by the ideas of mysticism besides Rilke, George and Kandinsky included Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Gustav Klimt, Hermann Hesse, Gustav Landauer and Ernst Bloch.

[37] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. Richard Burdon Haldane and John Kemp (London, 1896), iii, §34, p. 231.

intellectually-enlightened will, pictures every excitement, every effort, every movement of it, all that which the reason collects under the wide and negative concept of feeling, and which it cannot apprehend further through its abstract concepts'.[38] More than literature or visual art, great music could portray an ideal reality, not reducible to mere words, that transcended the material and the temporal, in a way that is reminiscent of mystical unity.[39] But, in yet another paradox, the means by which music portrayed this reality necessarily required it to unfold in 'real' time.

Consequently, despite Hehemann's reference to the 'peculiar Catholic mysticism' of *Gerontius*, it is reasonable to suppose that Elgar's work formed part of a wider contemporary discourse on the relationship between the human (or temporal) and the divine (or, in non-theistic terms, the absolute). That it was unusual for a British composer to participate in this discourse was something that Hehemann was quick to acknowledge. In the same passage in which he mentioned Elgar's 'peculiar Catholic mysticism', he claimed that in *Gerontius* 'Elgar's nationality has, outwardly, left the least mark'.[40] In his 1905 article he added:

> we must view [Elgar] as a national English composer, at the same time as a religious composer, and, strangely enough for a son of Albion, a Catholic composer. Like a game of chance, it is exceptional that a bard of Catholic mysticism should have arisen in England, and that it should appear to be the most natural thing.[41]

While Hehemann's comments might suggest that *Gerontius* was of interest only to Catholics, Volbach, in his 1904 article for *Allgemeine Musikzeitung*, hinted that Elgar's work contained something of the 'inner reality' that concerned the *fin de siècle* German artists who had engaged creatively with mysticism. 'An abundance of completely new moods of the soul, differentiated in minute detail – moods that, like being in a dream, embrace our soul beyond all reality – sound forth towards us from this piece', wrote Volbach admiringly. 'The presentation of mystical,

[38] *Ibid.*, §52, pp. 333, 335.

[39] 'The knowing individual as such [i.e. one who still consciously knows], and the particular thing known by him, are always in some place, at some time, and are links in the chain of causes and effects. The pure subject of knowledge [i.e. one who has lost his sense of individuality through the contemplation that Schopenhauer deems necessary to come to perceive Ideas directly] and his correlative, the Idea, have passed out of all these forms of the principle of sufficient reason: time, place, the individual that knows, and the individual that is known, have for them no meaning' (*ibid.*, §34, p. 232).

[40] Hehemann, 'Edward Elgar' (1903), 17: 'Elgars Nationalität äusserlich am wenigsten aufgeprägt ist.'

[41] Hehemann, 'Edward Elgar' (1905), 761: 'Wir müssen [Elgar] als einen nationalenglischen Komponisten ansehen, und als einen religiösen dazu und zwar seltsman genug bei einem Sohne Albions, als einen katholischen. Es nimmt sich aus wie ein Spiel des Zufalls, dass gerade in England ein Sänger katholischer Mystik entstand, und doch scheint es das natürlichste zu sein.'

incomprehensible moods is Elgar's domain.'[42] In his *Hochland* article, Volbach is more specific about the form that these mystical moods took:

> The entire magic of the deepest, innermost mysticism, as expressed here, and a blessedness and depth of being, which we experience best in the transfigured representations of visionary experience by the likes of Suso, express themselves in this poem; a feeling, carried by ardent divine love far away from mortality, floating away in blissful spheres. Not to believe in God, but to love Him: for as Caesarius of Heisterbach said of old, 'to believe in God is to pass through love into God'. This world-renouncing transfiguring divine love is the source from which Elgar's art was born, out of the mysterious depths of mysticism. In *Gerontius* for the first time, Elgar found the language for the inexpressible.[43]

The language that Volbach uses to describe mystical experience in *Gerontius* – 'transfigured', 'visionary', 'far away from mortality', 'world-renouncing' – is drawn as much from the lexicon of late nineteenth-century mysticism as it is from that of the Middle Ages; in particular, his seemingly paradoxical closing comment that Elgar 'found the language for the inexpressible' is underpinned by Schopenhauer's belief that music could reflect the workings of the human Will in a way that no other art could. Moreover, by referring to Suso and Caesarius, Volbach draws Elgar's work into the ambit of German mysticism's medieval past as much as its post-Schopenhauerian present. Thus, to adapt Hehemann's words, Elgar was entitled to live 'as one of us' in Germany not simply because *Gerontius* had attracted the admiration of Strauss, but because its subject matter and means of expression belonged to the same philosophical tradition as contemporaneous works in music, art and literature that used mysticism as a creative stimulus. Indeed, one might almost say that, having been appropriated for that tradition, *Gerontius* had 'become' a German work.

[42] Volbach, 'Die "Apostel" von Edward Elgar', 849: 'Eine Fülle von ganz neuen, bis ins kleinste differenzierter Seelenstimmungen, Stimmungen, die wie traumhaft ahnend, jenseits aller Wirklichkeit unsere Seele umfangen, klingen uns aus diesem Werke entgegen. Die Darstellung mystischer unfaßbarer Stimmungen ist Elgars Domäne.'

[43] Volbach, 'Edward Elgar', 317: 'Der ganze Zauber tiefinnerlichster Mystik, wie er sich hier ausspricht, eine Beseligung und Tiefe des Wesens, wie wir sie höchstens aus den verklärten Schilderungen visionären Schauens eines Suso empfinden, spricht sich in dieser Dichtung aus; ein Empfinden, getragen von brünstiger Gottesminne fernab dem Irdischen, in seligen Sphären verschwebend. Nicht glauben, Gott lieben: denn *Credere in Deum est per dilectionem ire in Deum*, sagt der alte Cäsarius von Heisterbach. Die weltabgewandte, verklärende Gottesminne ist der Quell, aus dem Elgars Kunst geboren, aus der geheimnisvollen Tiefe der Mystik. Im Gerontius fand Elgar zum ersten Male die Sprache für das Unausprechliche.' Caesarius (*c.*1170–1240), the prior of the Cistercian Abbey of Heisterbach, was best known for his 12-book *Dialogus magnus visionum ac miraculorum* (*Great Dialogue of Visions and Miracles*) and the three-book *Actus, pasio et miracula domini Engelberte*, the life of St Engelbert, archbishop of Cologne. New editions of these works appeared in 1851 (Cologne) and 1898 (Elberfeld) respectively.

Music and mysticism: 'Novissima hora est'

In the light of Schopenhauer's emphasis on the relationship between music and abstract feelings and Volbach's reference to a 'language for the inexpressible', it is worth considering how ideas associated with mysticism may be experienced musically in *Gerontius*. To do this, we need to consider the musical and dramatic form of the work. *Gerontius* consists of two journeys: the physical journey of an ailing man to his death in Part I, and the spiritual journey of his immortal soul to its judgment in Part II.[44] These physical and spiritual journeys are mirrored by a long-term flatward tonal movement, which, as Andreas Friesenhagen has noted, takes place with each 'number' of the work.[45] Thus Part I begins in D minor, proceeds through B♭, E♭ and A♭ majors in the early choruses to the centrepiece aria, 'Sanctus fortis', which is in a modally mixed B♭; it then travels through a succession of flat minor keys (E♭, A♭ and D♭) to C♯ minor (with strong hints of the submediant, E) at 'Novissima hora est', from which it moves, via F♯ minor, back to D, this time in the major mode. For the most part, Part II moves along a similar trajectory, at least from the Demons' Chorus onwards: the D minor and G minor of that section give way to the E♭ and A♭ of the Angelicals (with a sidestep to C major for the *Durchbruch*-like chorus, 'Praise to the holiest') and the D♭ of the Angel of the Agony; and then, following a shift to another four-sharp key signature as the voices on earth continue the prayers they sang in Part I, to F♯ minor at the moment of divine judgment, B minor at the Soul's horrified reaction to that judgment ('Take me away') and D major for the Angel's Farewell. These two tonal journeys are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 as tonal space diagrams.[46] But the

[44] Charles Edward McGuire, *Elgar's Oratorios: The Creation of an Epic Narrative* (Aldershot, 2002), 153; see also Andreas Friesenhagen, 'An English Oratorio as Pathfinder: Notes on the Form and Layout of Edward Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*', *The Best of Me*, ed. Hodgkins, 102–15 (pp. 103–4).

[45] Friesenhagen, 'An English Oratorio as Pathfinder', esp. pp. 110, 112; see also Moore, *Edward Elgar*, 305. *Gerontius* is technically a through-composed work, but old-fashioned 'number' structuring is discernible in both parts. For more on the quasi-number structuring of *Gerontius*, see McGuire, *Elgar's Oratorios*, Chapter 4 ('*The Dream of Gerontius* and Operatic Narrative'), 126–76, esp. pp. 146–53 and 165–74.

[46] For a theoretical and practical explanation of tonal (and harmonic) space diagrams, see Fred Lerdahl, *Tonal Pitch Space* (Oxford, 2001). In Lerdahl's theory (which develops earlier theories of tonal space, notably those of Gottfried Weber and Schoenberg), each row consists of alternating major and minor keys, the minor keys appearing to the right of their tonic major, and to the left of their relative major, while each column consists of the circles of fifths. 'Sharp' keys appear above 'flat' keys, so that tonal movement through increasingly 'sharp' keys is viewed as an ascent, and corresponding movement through increasingly 'flat' keys is viewed as a descent. The movement between keys is shown graphically by arrows. Wherever possible, a journey between two keys should take the shortest possible path; thus the move from D minor to B♭ at the beginning of Part I involves a move down one row to the right rather than down four rows to the left. In some cases, usually when the keys are some distance apart, there is a certain efficacy in bending this rule; and since in Lerdahl's theory each B♭ major in the grid is theoretically identical with every other B♭ major, there seems little practical reason not to do so. Here, the opening and closing tonic keys in each figure are underlined for clarity.

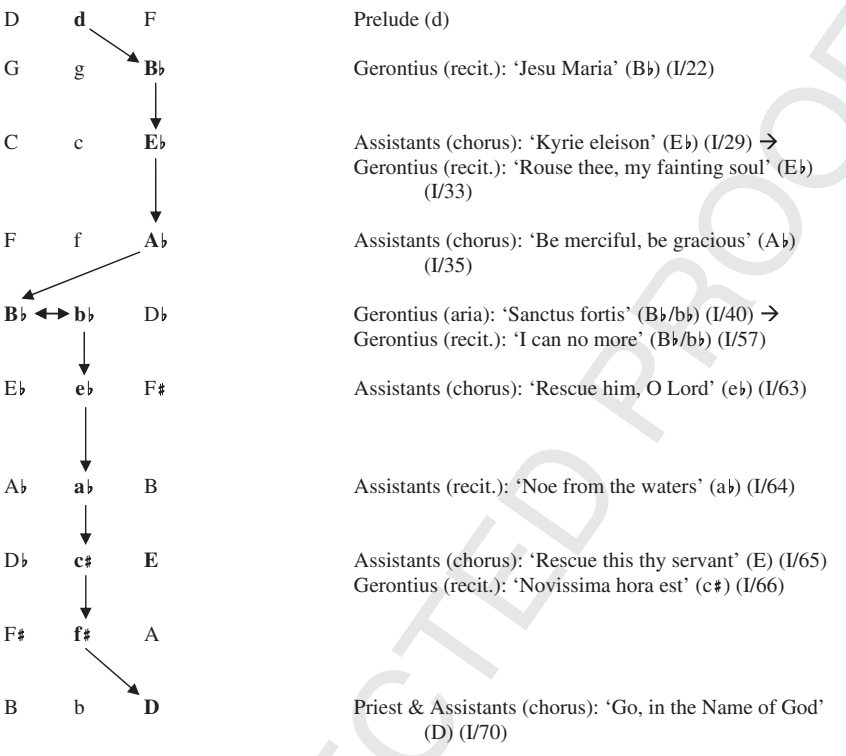


Figure 1. Elgar, *The Dream of Gerontius*, Part I, tonal space diagram.

355 opening of Part II does not fit this pattern. It begins in F major, the relative of D minor, but then travels along many different paths: through modal, relative and third-related alterations to E minor for the Angel's 'My work is done' (see Figure 3); and then, following a return to F, to a three-flat key signature (E♭, with a strong hint of C minor) for the Soul's and Angel's duet, 'A presage falls upon thee', 360 before moving, via E♭ minor and G minor, to D minor for the Demons' Chorus (Figure 4).[47] This is not so much wandering tonality as directionless tonality.

The explanation for this departure from the harmonic pattern of the rest of the piece lies in the dramatic structure of Part II. The spiritual journey begins only after the Angel has explained to the Soul why it has to be undertaken at all, 365 and this takes place in a section that, like both mystical 'Gelassenheit' and Schopenhauerian aesthetic contemplation, seems to transcend time and space. The musical material is soft, slow, undulating and, above all, repetitive; and the Soul comments that:

[47] It is also possible to conceive of these progressions in neo-Riemannian terms, although the implications of such an approach lie outside the scope of this article.

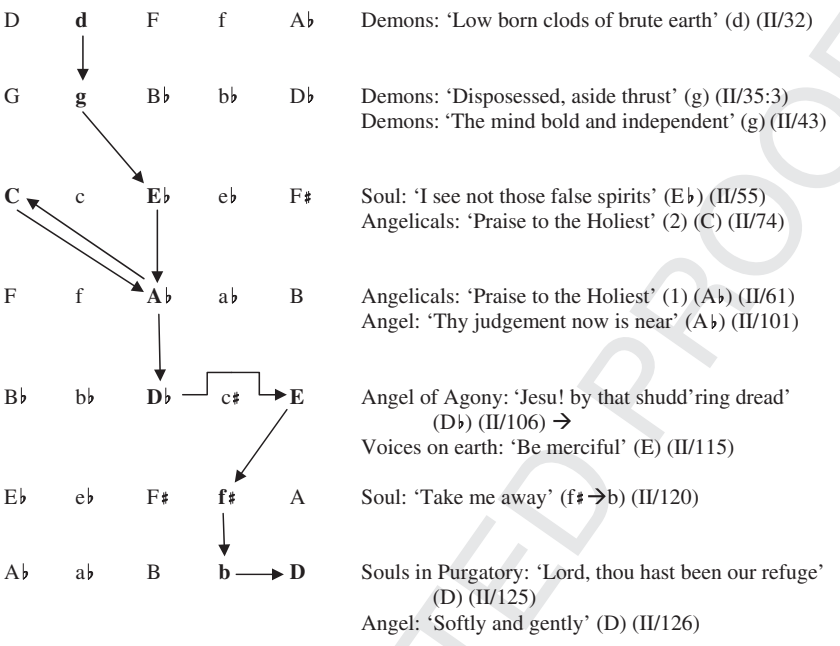
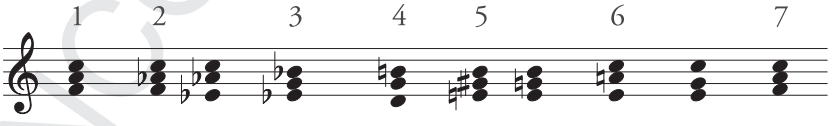


Figure 2. Elgar, *The Dream of Gerontius*, Part II, from the Demons' Chorus onwards, tonal space diagram.

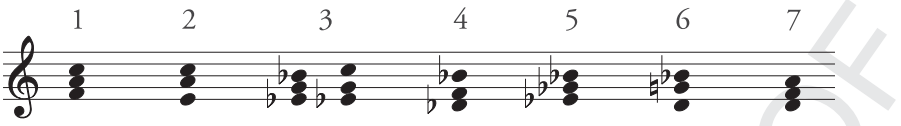
I hear no more the busy beat of time,
No, nor my flutt'ring breath, nor struggling pulse;
Nor does one moment differ from the next.

Within such an extraordinarily static atmosphere, any goal-directed tonal narrative would be impossible: it would betray a sense of temporality that is entirely alien to the text. Instead, the music circumnavigates F major and D minor (the one-flat



1: Opening→ Soul: 'I went to sleep' (F) (II/4)
2: Soul: 'A strange refreshment' (f→A♭) (II/5)
3: Soul: 'Another marvel' (E♭) (II/9:3)
4: Soul: 'A uniform And gentle pressure tells me I am not Self moving' (G) (II/10)
5: Soul: 'And hark! I hear a singing' (II/10:5)→ Angel: 'My work is done' (E→e) (II/11:6)
6: Angel: 'It is a member of that family' (a) (II/16)
7: Soul: 'What lets me now from going to my Lord?' (F) (II/22)

Figure 3. Elgar, *The Dream of Gerontius*, Part II, opening section, first cycle.



1: Soul: 'What lets me now from going to my Lord?' (F) (II/22)
2: Angel: 'It is because Then thou didst fear' (a) (II/24)
3: Soul & Angel: 'A presage falls upon thee' (E♭/c) (II/26)
4: Soul: 'But hark! upon my sense' (b♭) (II/29:2)
5: Angel: 'We are now arrived' (e♭) (II/30:2)
6: Soul: 'Hungry and wild to claim their property' (g) (II/31:2)
7: Demons: 'Low born clods of brute earth' (d) (II/32)

Figure 4. Elgar, *The Dream of Gerontius*, Part II, opening section, second cycle.

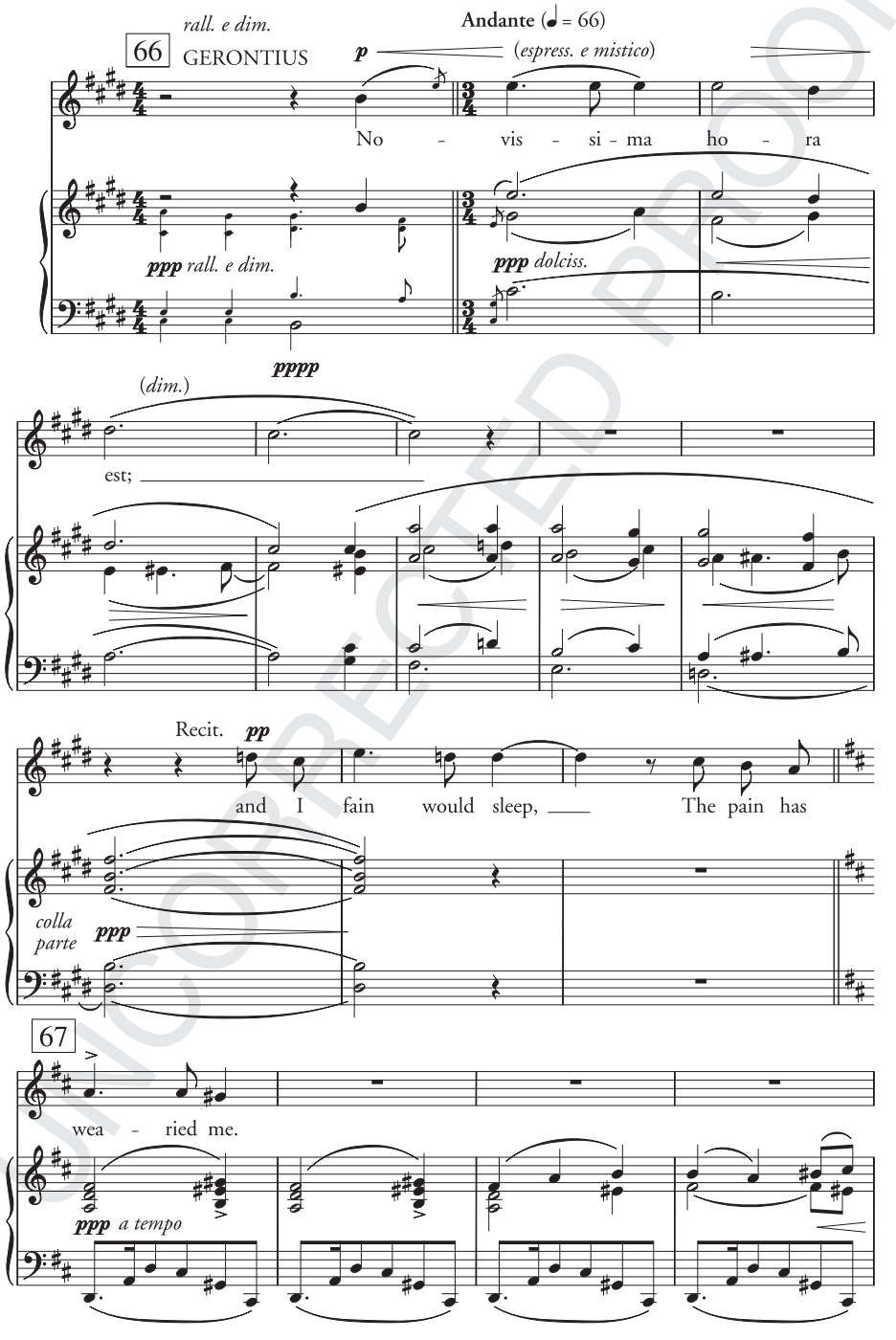
keys that respectively begin and end the section) without showing any signs of travelling to any alternative destination. In short, it is music in keeping with the state in which the Soul finds itself at the beginning of Part II, and in which it remains suspended (barring occasional reflections on its mortal form's past fears of judgment, fears which the Angel quickly dispels) until the beginning of the Demons' Chorus. Only with the start of that chorus, and with it the start of the Soul's journey to the Almighty, does the long-term tonal narrative of Part II properly begin.[48]

While the transcendence at the opening of Part II is not bound by any particular creed – prior to the arrival of the Angel, the Soul says nothing that refers to Christian doctrine – other passages in the work suggest mysticism that is more specifically Catholic in nature. A good example of this is the figure that Elgar sets to the words 'Novissima hora est' (hereafter referred to as 'Novissima hora'), with which Gerontius dies in Part I (see Example 1(a)); it appears four times throughout the piece, most memorably in the immediate aftermath of the Soul's coming face to face with God in Part II. Hehemann's claim that the motif is associated with 'the return of the highest ecstasy of the hereafter' is particularly apt.[49] In mysticism, ecstasy was, according to Jakob Mühlethaler, a 'condition of complete seclusion of the soul, where the outside world steps back, dazzled by the brilliance of an inner light [. . .] which illuminates for us a spiritual world for immediate vision', and was often characterized by a 'loss of self-consciousness', 'loss of consciousness of space and

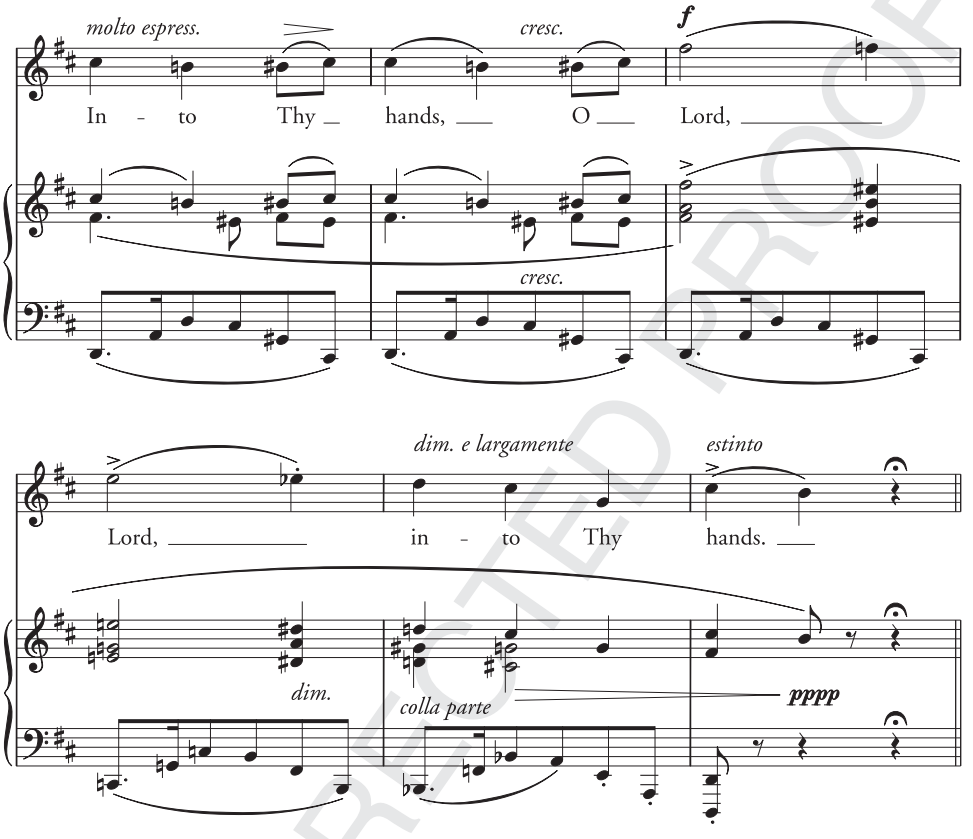
[48] McGuire's analysis of Part II (*Elgar's Oratorios*, 165–74) refers to the Demons, Angelicals and Angel of the Agony/Judgment sections as '*tableaux entendus*', which 'teach the Soul and the audience something about the afterworld' through the large-scale choruses and the dialogue between the Soul and the Angel (p. 165). Although the *tableaux* necessarily have to appear in a particular order, their essentially reflective and explanatory character means that they are characterized not by drama that moves forward in time (with the exception of the moment of judgment itself) but by the intensification of a particular moment.

[49] Hehemann, 'Edward Elgar' (1903), 17: 'die höchsten Wonnen den Jenseits wiederkehren'.

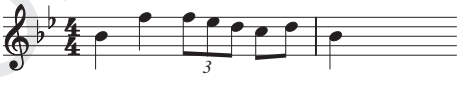
Example 1(a). Elgar, *The Dream of Gerontius*, Part I, rehearsal figures 66:1–67:10: first appearance of 'Novissima hora'.



Example 1(a) (Continued)



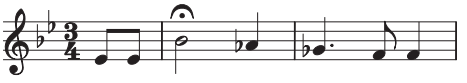
Example 1(b). Elgar, *The Dream of Gerontius*: 'Christ's Peace' motif.



time', and an 'absence of all ideas and concepts, particularly in the condition where the identity of the subject and object are experienced in the same way'.[50] In short, ecstasy combines 'Gelassenheit' and revelatory self-knowledge: precisely what the

[50] Mühlethaler, *Die Mystik bei Schopenhauer*, 87–8: 'ein Zustand völliger Abgeschiedenheit der Seele, wo die äußere Welt zurücktritt, überstrahlt vom Glanze eines innern Lichtes, [. . .] eines Lichtes, das uns eine geistige Welt zur unmittelbaren Schauung beleuchtet'; 'ein Verschwinden des Ich-Bewußtseins'; 'Verlust des Raum- und Zeitbewußtseins'; 'Fehlen aller Vorstellungen und Begriffe, überhaupt als einen Zustand, wo die Identität von Subjekt und Objekt gleichsam erlebt wird'.

Example 1(c). Elgar, *The Dream of Gerontius*: 'Christ's Peace' motif.



Soul experiences at the moment of divine judgment. For this reason, 'Novissima hora' merits closer hermeneutical consideration.[51]

According to Jerrold Northrop Moore, the musical origins of 'Novissima hora' lie in two motifs introduced earlier in Part I: 'Christ's peace' (Part I, rehearsal figure 22:5; see Example 1(b)), and the 'Agony' music (Part I, rehearsal figure 62:5–7; see Example 1(c)), although in both cases, the initial leap is of a fifth rather than a fourth.[52] Moore's suggestion is certainly appropriate when we consider the words with which the motif appears. The main textual association of 'Novissima hora' is with the moment in death when human soul and divinity meet: a moment, in other words, that combines the agony of receiving divine judgment with the hope of eternal life and heavenly peace. Thus at the motif's first appearance in Part I (rehearsal figure 66), Gerontius's cry 'Novissima hora est' ('It is the last hour') quotes a passage from the first epistle of St John that warns of antichrists as the second coming draws near; a few bars later, Gerontius's earthly life ends with the utterance, 'Into Thy hands, O Lord' (rehearsal figure 67:5), a reference to St Luke's account of the Crucifixion.[53] The motif reappears midway through Part II, when the Soul, having just overcome the Demons, asks its Guardian Angel: 'shall I see/My dearest Master, when I reach His throne?' The Angel replies that the Soul will indeed see

[51] No examination of the motivic content of *Gerontius* would be complete without recourse to Jaeger's *Analytical and Descriptive Notes* on the work (August J. Jaeger, *The Dream of Gerontius, John Henry Newman and Edward Elgar: Analytical and Descriptive Notes* (London, 1901; rev. edn 1974)). Written for the work's première, the *Notes* aimed to provide listeners with a synopsis of the main musical themes in a manner similar to Hans von Wolzogen's thematic guide to the *Ring* cycle, in which Wagner's leitmotifs are given specific non-musical labels. While Elgar was certainly flattered by Jaeger's implicit comparison of him with Wagner – though the extent to which the themes in *Gerontius* are strictly speaking leitmotifs rather than reminiscence motifs is certainly debatable – he distanced himself from his friend's insistence that the themes in *Gerontius* be given 'a *one word* name *wherever possible*', commenting that 'my wife fears you may be inclined to lay too great stress on the *leitmotiven* plan because I really do it without thought – intuitively, I mean'. As Christopher Grogan has commented, Alice's alleged concerns were undoubtedly Elgar's own; he 'seem[ed . . .] to have anticipated the likely adverse influence of Jaeger's methods upon the audience and the critics, who would be encouraged to perceive the music as no more than the stringing together of essentially unconnected thematic tags'. In the event, Jaeger gave names to only 15 of the 76 quoted themes, including 'Novissima hora', and these names were put in parentheses. See letter from Jaeger to Elgar, 26 August 1900, and letter from Elgar to Jaeger, 28 August 1900; both are quoted in Christopher Grogan, '"My dear analyst": Some Observations on Elgar's Correspondence with A. J. Jaeger regarding the "Apostles" Project', *Music and Letters*, 72 (1991), 48–60 (pp. 48–9) (italics original).

[52] Moore, *Edward Elgar*, 305.

[53] 1 *John* ii. 18; *Luke* xxiii. 46. Appropriately, Jaeger describes the figures as 'plaintive' (*The Dream of Gerontius*, 14).

God 'for one moment', adding, to the strains of 'Novissima hora', 'that sight of the Most Fair/Will gladden thee, but it will pierce thee too' (rehearsal figure 56:5). The word 'pierce' comes at the climax of the phrase, emphasizing the connection between Christ's sacrifice and the pain the Soul would feel on being confronted directly with its sinful life. To this anticipation of agony, however, may be added the anticipation of eventual transfiguration at rehearsal figure 112:5, when the Angel of the Agony petitions God on behalf of souls currently in purgatory, again accompanied by the 'Novissima hora' motif: 'Hasten, Lord, their hour, and bid them come to Thee,/To that glorious Home, where they shall ever gaze on Thee.' And it is to 'Novissima hora' that the Soul sings its reaction to its moment of judgment before God, 'Take me away' (rehearsal figure 120). Starkly aware of its inherently sinful nature, the Soul is filled with shame and self-revulsion, which gives way within a few bars to a desire for purgation ('and in the lowest deep/There let me be'). Purgatory will be a further agony, but it is a necessary one if the Soul is eventually to have eternal life.

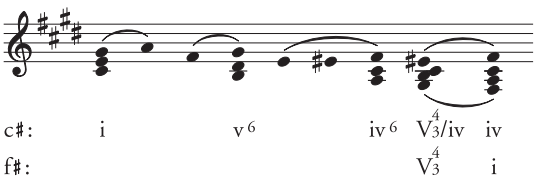
A particular feature of the 'Novissima hora' motif is that the texts it accompanies reflect Catholicism's dialectical approach to forgiveness. The familiar Catholic 'cycle' of sin–confession–forgiveness is transmuted, in death, to earthly sins–judgment–atonement; in turn, atonement takes the dialectical form of judgment–purgatory–heaven. 'Novissima hora' illustrates passages that glimpse the syntheses (atonement/heaven), but only through emphasizing the antitheses (the Soul's shortcomings and its need for purgation before reaching paradise). In other words, for all its other-worldliness, it draws attention to the fact that Gerontius is 'a man like us', whose encounters with God show up his imperfections and the need to remedy them.

The four statements of 'Novissima hora', which we shall now consider in turn, vary in key, instrumentation, phrasing and, latterly, metre; these differences are summarized in Table 1. One thing that they have in common, however, is an inability to attain successful closure. This is because the underlying harmonic progression of 'Novissima hora', i–v^6–iv^6, is iterative: the closing iv^6 chord is tonicized by a $V^{4/3}$–i cadence and the motif is repeated a fifth lower (see Figure 5). In theory, and assuming some octave displacement to preserve audibility, this progression could perpetuate itself indefinitely through the circle of fifths, a feature that aptly complements the motif's textual associations with the eternal; thus when

TABLE 1
APPEARANCES OF THE 'NOVISSIMA HORA' MOTIF

Passage	*Dynamic*	*Key*	*Metre*	*Scoring*
I/66	*p/pp/ppp*	c♯/f♯/b	3/4	Gerontius, 1st and 2nd violins, violas
II/56	*p, cresc.* to *f*	d♯/g♯/c♯	3/4	Angel, 3 solo violas, 3 solo cellos
II/112	*p, cresc.* to *ff*	f/b♭	3/4	Angel of the Agony, strings, woodwind, horns
II/120	*Fff to pp*	f♯/b	4/4	Soul, full orchestra

Figure 5. Harmonic reduction of 'Novissima' motif, *The Dream of Gerontius*, Part I, figures 66:2–66:6.



the progression is halted the sense of caesura is particularly pronounced. A good example of this is in the initial statement of the motif (Example 1(a)). We hear the progression twice: first in C♯ minor, when the orchestra accompanies the singer; then in F♯ minor, when the orchestra plays alone. The second phrase ends on $iv^6/f♯$, a first-inversion B minor chord that seemingly demands tonicization by a closing cadence. But this does not happen. Instead, the chord simply dies away, and a vocal recitative takes the music to the Lydian-inflected D major of the 'Fear' and 'Miserere' motifs (rehearsal figures 67:1 and 67:7 respectively); the dying Gerontius sings his last words ('Into Thy hands, O Lord'), and once more the music peters out on a first-inversion chord of B minor. Again, this chord is left unresolved. After a short pause, the music turns to B♭ for the Priest's 'Proficiscere, anima Christiana', and thence to D major for the closing chorus of Part I.

First-inversion chords are unlikely to provide entirely convincing points of closure. But there is an additional reason why the first of these B minor chords feels particularly unsatisfactory. This is the upward chromatic movement of the second violins in the third bar of the 'Novissima hora' phrase (the A–A♯–B at rehearsal figure 66:8), which seems gesturally to be asking a question that will remain unanswered unless the figure can receive tonal affirmation with a V–i cadence to a root-position B minor. What, hermeneutically, might this interrogative gesture mean? One possible answer is that, given the association of the 'Novissima hora' motif with the eternal, the lack of closure at figure 66:9 may suggest the infinite itself. If so, the purpose of the rising chromatic line is surely to emphasize that all humanity (whether Gerontius, the composer, the audience or anyone else) has to *inquire* as to the nature of that infinity, since it exists outside normal human space–time parameters. For Gerontius to need to ask such questions may indicate his very human lack of faith, and ignorance of what is to come, that is belied by his various biblical allusions. Thus the purpose of this passage is to express not only the faith of the dying Gerontius, but also, musically, his doubts. And it is perhaps for this reason that at rehearsal figure 66:6 it is the orchestra that continues the musical argument, not the soloist: taking its cue from the end of *Parsifal*, an orchestra may hint what words cannot say. But it can hint only so far. As yet, we have no idea of the nature of the God whom the soul will meet, nor of the type of divine judgment that it will receive. The answers to these questions become clearer only in subsequent statements of the motif.

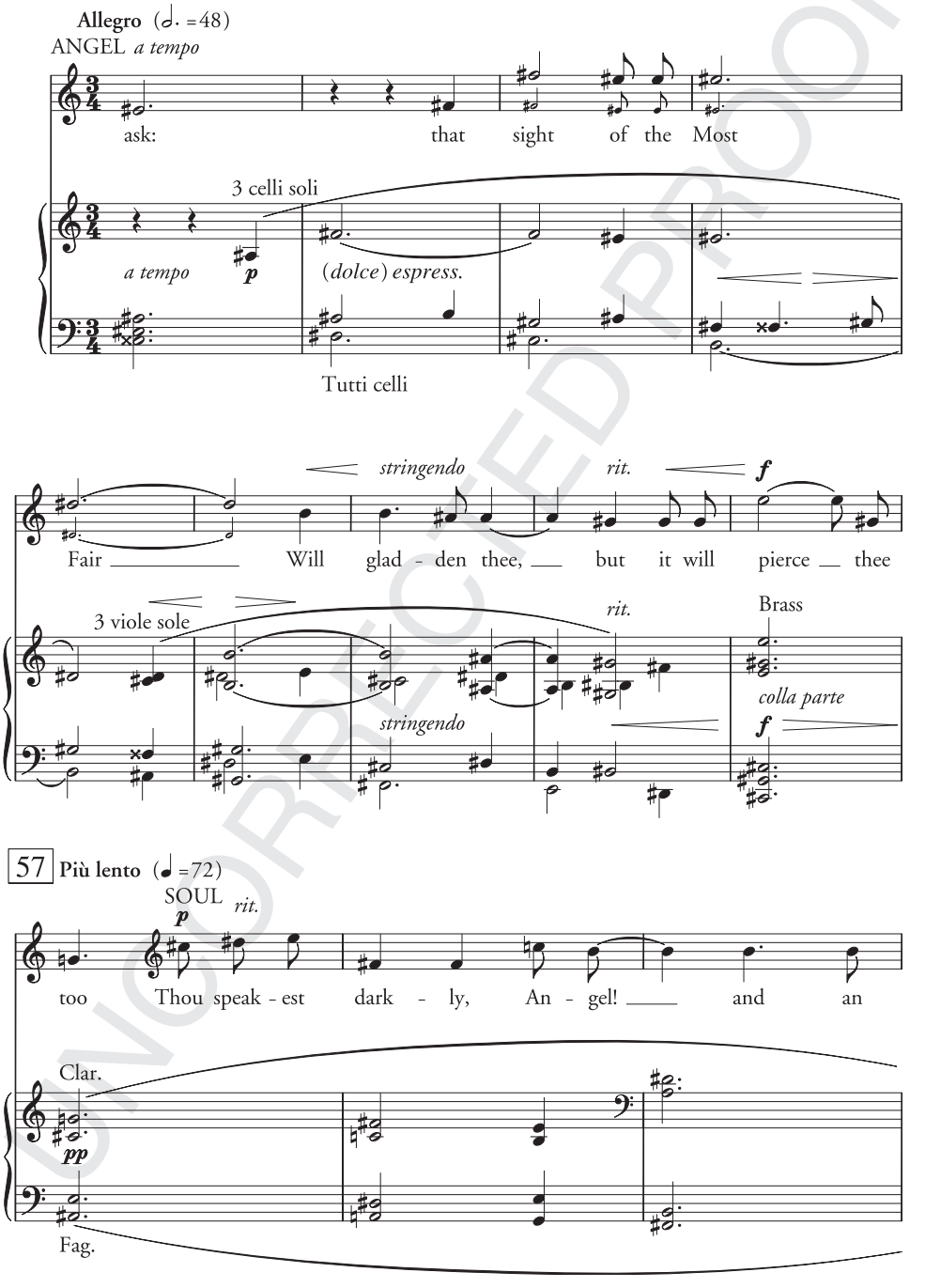
A feature of the second appearance of 'Novissima hora' (see Example 2) is the disruption of musical grammar – initially dynamic and metrical, latterly harmonic – caused by the caesura that halts the unending progressions of the motif. As the Angel's description of the 'sight of the Most Fair' turns from gladness to pain, the phrase-length is compressed from four bars to three (rehearsal figure 56:9–11); on the word 'pierce' the motif's self-perpetuating is punctured by a loud brass chord of C♯ minor. But although this chord has been prepared by the $V^{4/3}$–i cadence, it does not betoken tonal stability; instead, over the next eight bars the tonal centre moves to E minor via a series of diminished and dominant sevenths in the clarinets and bassoons, above which the Soul intones an angular piece of recitative. The role of 'Novissima hora' here, therefore, is to signal a momentary breakdown of musical coherence, one that is analogous to the pain involved in seeing God, unpurged of one's sins, or perhaps indicative of the collapse of human conceptions of relativity when confronting the infinite. As in Part I, the motif is musically disturbing: it raises questions that it cannot (yet) answer, and instead responds by fragmenting.

A more definite, but negative, answer results from the questions posed by the third statement of 'Novissima hora', which appears at rehearsal figure 112:5 (see Example 3), towards the end of the Angel of the Agony's solo.[54] The four-bar phrase is stated twice as the Angel sings of the 'glorious Home' that awaits the souls in purgatory, and this is followed by a further four bars that end on a first-inversion chord of D♭ major (the 'gaze' of 'where they shall ever gaze on Thee'). Given that D♭ is the local tonic, this would seem to indicate that 'Novissima hora' supports the musical grammar here, rather than undermines it; and at one level this is true. But the contrast between the *pp dolcissimo* ascending scale of the first violins at rehearsal figure 113 and the iv–I/D♭ cadence that follows the second fermata is very striking. The former still speaks the celestial language of 'Novissima hora'; indeed the ascending scale, ending on ^5/D♭, faintly recalls the Dresden Amen of *Parsifal* (appropriately enough, in view of the text's suggestions of eternity). This Dresden Amen, however, is inherently unstable: its 'resolution' onto a first-inversion chord suggests that hopes of eternity will for the moment be dashed. And dashed they are: the plagal cadence at the *Allargando* confirms D♭ (albeit a modally mixed D♭) as the tonic, but in a way that seems brutally to mock the higher aspirations of the bars immediately preceding it. The Amen of paradise has been quashed by the Amen of impending purgatory.

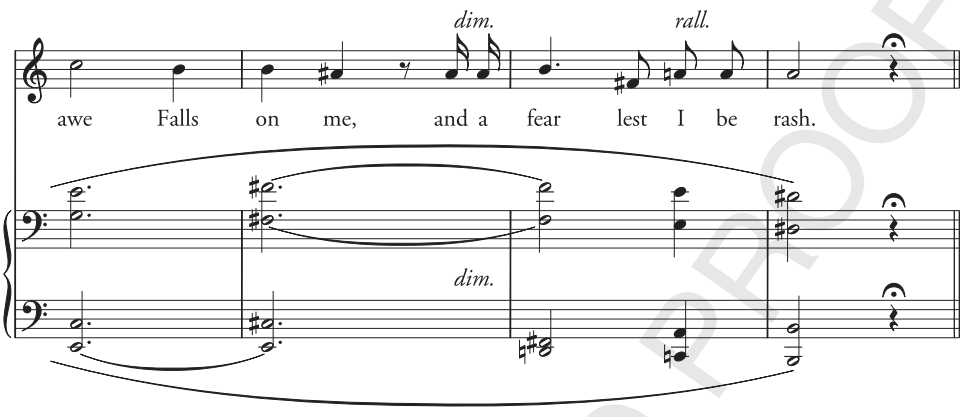
Thus the 'meaning' of 'Novissima hora' is somewhat ambiguous. The words associated with the motif point to the desirability of heaven, but its music suggests that, at present, such eternity is beyond the Soul's grasp. 'Novissima hora' asks hopeful questions about eternity, but these are met with negative answers that

[54] *Gerontius* is not a 'number' oratorio, so this solo (figures 106–14) is not designated an aria. But it has certain aria-like qualities: a scena and recitative introduction (figures 101–6); an internal Bar form (two Stollen at figures 106 and 108:3, and an Abgesang at 110:3); and, for all its chromaticism – the openings of the Stollen are characterized by I/♭II discords – a single tonic (D♭).

Example 2. Elgar, *The Dream of Gerontius*, Part II, rehearsal figures 56:4–57:7: second appearance of 'Novissima hora'.



Example 2 (Continued)

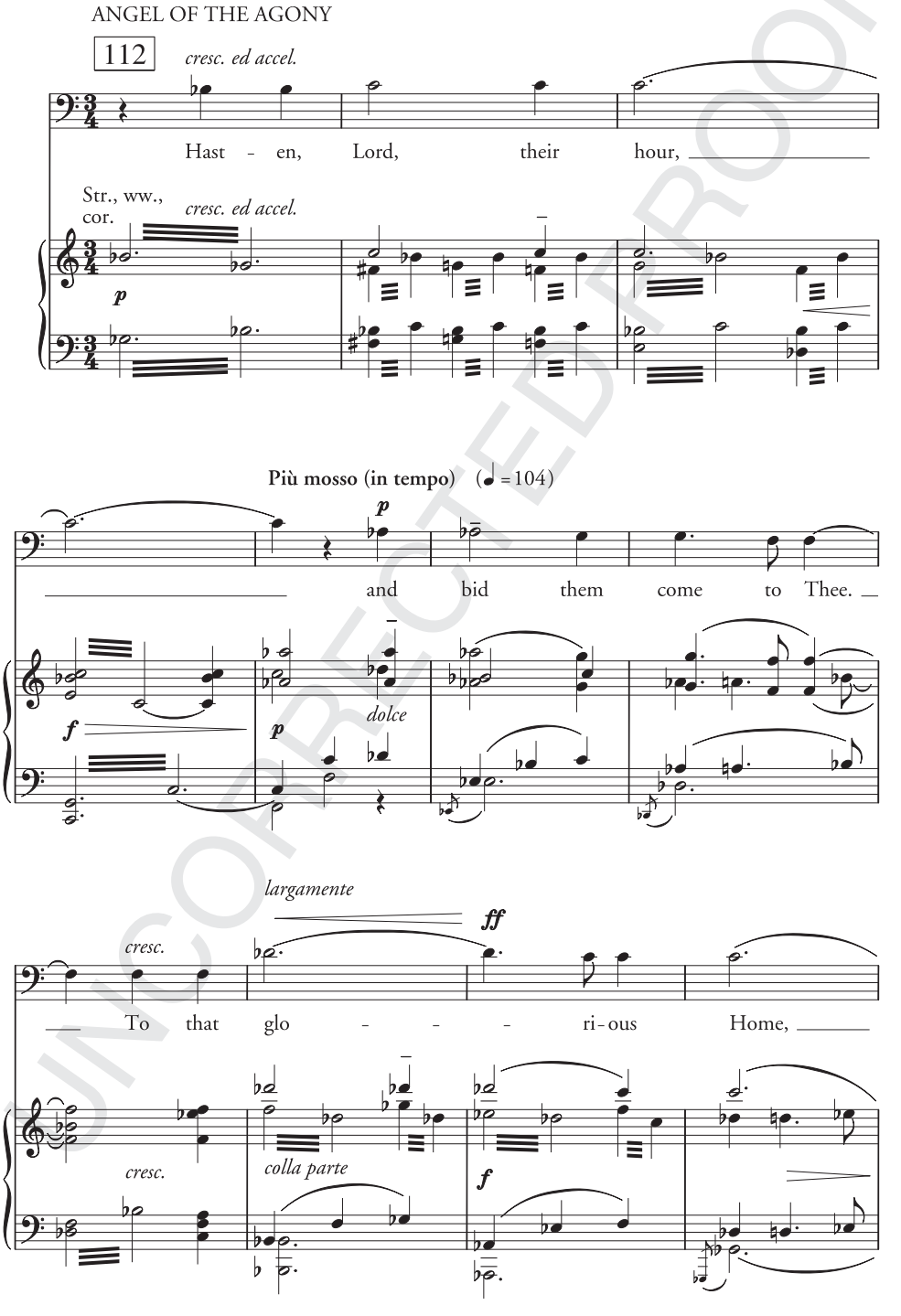


emphasize the obstacle to the Soul's entering heaven: its sinfulness. So it is particularly apt that 'Novissima hora' is central to the Soul's reaction to its meeting with the Almighty at rehearsal figure 120 (see Example 4), for it is here that the Soul feels its sinfulness most acutely. The general pause that represents the meeting itself is followed by a *fff* chord of $V^{13}/f\sharp$ where, Elgar wrote in the score, '"for one moment" must every instrument exert its fullest force'.[55] The falling semitone in the main melodic voice, *a*"–*g*♯", recalls part of the 'Judgment' motif with which the piece opens.[56] But it is 'Novissima hora', no longer celestially lyrical but dramatic and awesome, that expresses the self-loathing that the Soul feels on receiving its judgment (rehearsal figure 120:3). The motif is musically transformed from its previous manifestations in several ways. Most obviously, its triple metre is altered to the 4/4 of the 'Judgment' motif, and thus literally 'marches' to the time of the divine verdict: immediate absolution from earthly wrongs is not a possibility. The phrase is

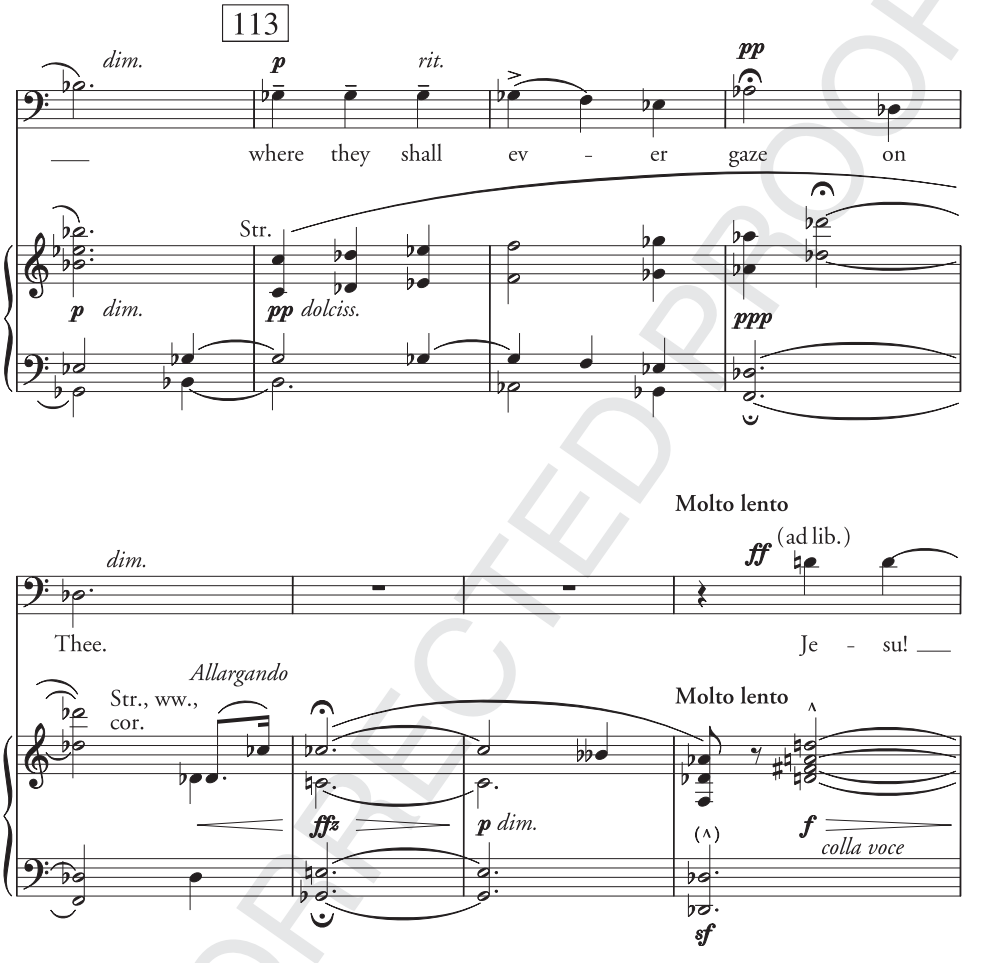
[55] This forceful reaction was not in Elgar's original plans. He had intended 'Take me away' to be set quietly, part of a gradual *diminuendo* that took place from 'Praise to the Holiest' to the end of the work, in order to give the impression of a Soul 'shrivelled, parched & effete, powerless & finished' from the minute it had seen God. However, he responded to criticism from Jaeger, who argued that 'the first sensations the soul would experience [on seeing God] would be an *awful*, *overwhelming agitation*!; a whirlwind of sensations of the acutest kind coursing through it; a bewilderment of fear, exitation, crushing, overmastering hopelessness &c &c, "Take me away!!"'. Jaeger added that Wagner 'would have made this the *climax* of *expression* in the work', whereas Elgar's proposed solution had 'shirked [. . .] the supremest moment'. The negative comparison with Wagner and, in a subsequent letter, with Richard Strauss, seemed to act as a spur to Elgar, who revised the section to something closer to what Jaeger had envisaged. See Elgar, letter to Jaeger, 20 June 1900, quoted in *Elgar and his Publishers*, ed. Moore, i, 202; Jaeger, letter to Elgar, 27 June 1900, quoted *ibid.*, 204–5 (Jaeger's italics); and Jaeger, letter to Elgar, 30 June 1900, quoted *ibid.*, 208.

[56] Moore, *Edward Elgar*, 300. Note, however, that the *a*″–*g*♯″–*c*♯″–*a*″ melodic line at figure 120 recalls the *f*♯′–*e*♯′–*a*♯–*f*♯ at figures 56:3–5 in Part II. In the earlier passage the Angel sings 'Thou knowest not, my child, What thou dost ask' when the Soul expresses his hope that he will see God; in the later passage this knowledge is made fully apparent.

Example 3. Elgar, *The Dream of Gerontius*, Part II, rehearsal figures 112:1–113:7: third appearance of 'Novissima hora'.



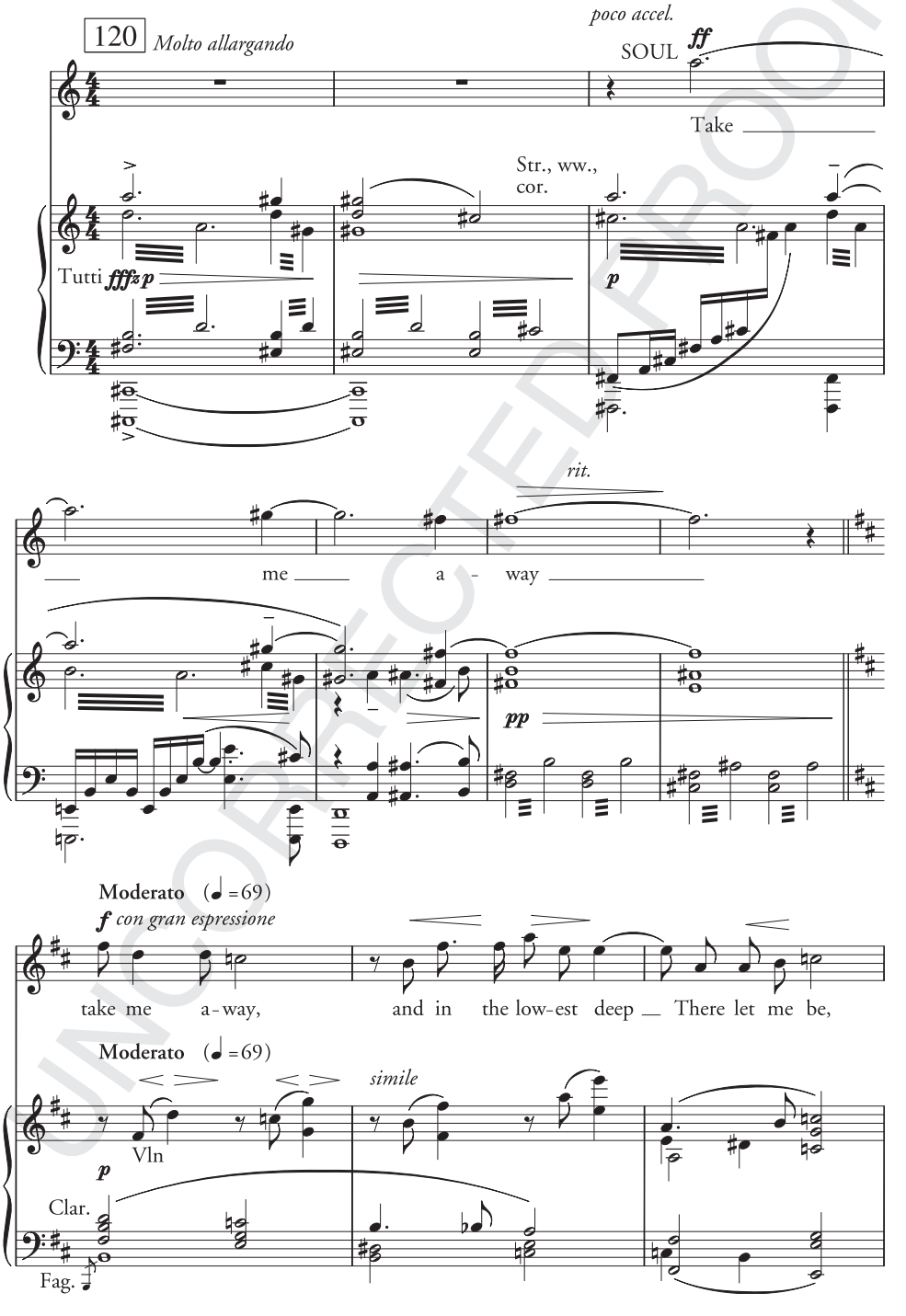
Example 3 (Continued)



extended to five bars, complete with a written *ritardando* (another caesura), as if to give the Soul a moment to gather its thoughts and express itself coherently, this time in B minor. But the *Moderato* passage that ensues at rehearsal figure 120:8 is anything but coherent. Instead of a second four-bar statement of 'Novissima hora' (which earlier statements of the motif suggest would be the most likely continuation here), the motif is liquidated. Its initial leap of a sixth survives (in the first violins and violas), but that is all; in its place the clarinets and cellos intone the rhythms and descending chromaticism of the 'Judgment' motif, while C♮s in the vocal line and harmony cast doubt on the stability of B minor as a tonal centre. It is as if 'Novissima hora', quite literally, has lost its voice.

Why is this so? A possible reason is that, from its first appearance in Part I, 'Novissima hora' has been associated with a hoped-for heavenly respite from earthly

Example 4. Elgar, *The Dream of Gerontius*, Part II, rehearsal figures 120:1–120:10: fourth appearance of 'Novissima hora'.



woes; now that these hopes have been crushed (at least for the time being), the motif is incapable of saying anything more.[57] If this is the case, then rehearsal figure 120 in Part II is perhaps the answer to the musical questions posed in Part I, at rehearsal figure 66. That earlier section suggested doubts in the attainability of Gerontius's goal: at F♯ minor, the voice fell silent; and at B minor, the orchestra did. In Part II, at rehearsal figure 120, these doubts are confirmed: the voice re-enters in F♯ minor, but the orchestra's (and voice's) attempt to continue 'Novissima hora' in B minor fails. Subsequent attempts to resurrect the motif are no more successful. At rehearsal figure 122, an ascending sixth in the violins signals an attempt to do so, this time in E minor; but again non-harmonic notes in the melody – F♮ in 122:1, E♭ in 122:2 – put paid to this. By contrast, several other motifs are eminently recognizable, notably the 'Sanctus' music (rehearsal figure 121:5) and, especially, the Angel/Soul duet from Part II, figure 26 (rehearsal figure 123). But it is significant that these figures previously expressed the Soul's (or Gerontius's) hopes and fears *before* judgment; they formed part of the journey to the *telos* of rehearsal figure 120, and, in their post-*telos* manifestation, form part of a similar journey to (and, we may assume, eventually beyond) purgatory. 'Novissima hora', however, is different. Even in its pre-*telos* statements it anticipates the moment of judgment itself: a moment that exists *beyond* time and space, and one with which the Soul cannot cope when it experiences it at rehearsal figure 120. It is scarcely surprising that the motif should be the cause of fragmentation rather than proper closure; given its association with the infinite, which by its nature is indefinable, closure was perhaps always impossible.

A hermeneutic analysis of this sort reveals important differences between *Gerontius* and *Tod und Verklärung*. The narrative of Strauss's work is fairly simple: a hero dies, is transfigured, and arrives in Elysium. Such a straightforward outcome is foreign to *Gerontius*, however; a motif like 'Novissima hora', which is associated both with a heavenly destination that remains out of reach and a state of sinfulness whose purgation begins only when the work ends, testifies to a work that resists any clear-cut conclusion. In part, this is because in *Gerontius*, unlike *Tod*, there are two protagonists: the dying man whose spiritual journey we follow, and the Almighty who passes judgment on him. The conflict between them, however, is not conventionally dramatic, but rather psychological. God is not depicted musically; the Soul receives its sentence in silence. Instead, God's character is revealed second-hand: by the Soul's questions and the Guardian Angel's answers prior to judgment, and by the Soul's tortured reaction afterwards. Yet there is a difference between the Soul's pre- and post-judgment views of God. Pre-judgment, the Almighty is constructed as a subconscious projection of the Soul's mind – a God whom the Soul purports to understand, and with whom it believes it can be 'united' forever. But the

[57] Appropriately enough, it is at the words 'a singer who sings no more' that 'Novissima hora' is quoted in Elgar's later choral work *The Music Makers*. For more on the web of self-quotations and allusions that Elgar uses in this piece, see Aidan J. Thomson, 'Unmaking *The Music Makers*', *Elgar Studies*, ed. J. P. E. Harper-Scott and Julian Rushton (Cambridge, 2007), 99–134.

moment of judgment reveals a far greater God, one beyond the Soul's imagination, and before whom it feels alienated. On meeting the real Almighty, the Soul is acutely conscious of the sinfulness of 'all that makes me man'; it cannot dwell eternally with God – at least, not yet. Moreover, as with the opening of Part II, the existence of something infinite, eternal, beyond human conceptions of time and space, is too much for the Soul to cope with – and the music illustrates this lack of comprehension accordingly.

Mysticism and genre: oratorio as epic

The differing treatment of time and tonal direction in *Gerontius*, across the work as a whole and in the context of individual motifs, raises important questions about how (indeed whether) the work fits into the generic boundaries of oratorio. Strictly speaking, *Gerontius* is not an oratorio at all; as Michael Kennedy has observed, 'the whole point of the work is that it cannot be fitted into such a category', and it was 'simply what Elgar called it on the title-page: a setting to music of a poem'.[58] But this distinction is somewhat artificial. As a large-scale sacred choral work, *Gerontius* may be said to have been written in dialogue with the nineteenth-century English oratorio tradition (a tradition Ernest Newman described damningly as 'this deadly form of British art, the day for which has long gone by'). This fact was acknowledged by contemporary critics from both sides of the English Channel; some of them, indeed, described the work as an oratorio, whatever was written on the title page.[59] Far more important is to ascertain what type of oratorio *Gerontius* might be. To this end Elgar's German critics once more offer a possible solution, and one that is consistent with their mystical conception of the work.

Elgar's German supporters objected not to oratorio *per se*, as Newman did, but to Mendelssohn's legacy within the genre, which they considered to be characterized by stylistic conservatism and dramatic mundaneness.[60] Part of Elgar's appeal to these critics lay in the more progressive idiom of *Gerontius*, and it is striking how they attempted to distance him from Mendelssohn. In an article about *The Apostles*, Neitzel claimed that the 'mystical-Catholic contemplation [. . .] of which [Elgar]

[58] Michael Kennedy, *Portrait of Elgar* (3rd edn, Oxford, 1984), 134. For a good survey of the difficulties involved in the generic classification of *Gerontius*, see McGuire, *Elgar's Oratorios*, 38–45.

[59] Newman, *Elgar*, 55. Later in the same paragraph Newman explicitly describes *Gerontius* as an oratorio: 'It was because in his next oratorio [*Gerontius*] Elgar was fortunate enough to get a theme alive with human emotion from first to last that he succeeded in making of it such a masterpiece.' For a German critique that refers to *Gerontius* as an oratorio, see n. 16 above.

[60] Although the extent to which Volbach and Neitzel would have been aware of this is questionable, these exponents would have included a great many nineteenth-century British composers; as Howard E. Smither has observed: 'From the late 1840s to the 1880s, the primary model [for English oratorio] was Mendelssohn' ('Oratorio: England and America, 19th century', *New Grove Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>, accessed 3 May 2013).

already gave many examples in the second part of *The Dream of Gerontius*' belonged to a specifically mystical tradition of oratorio whose modern exemplars were Liszt and the Belgian composer Edgar Tinel (1854–1912), rather than Mendelssohn.[61] Neitzel did not specify from where this tradition originated, but his approving description of the choruses in *The Apostles* as the 'ground pillars of the mood of the text' would seem to suggest Handel, the composer of some of the most famous of all oratorio choruses.[62] Volbach also viewed Elgar as the natural successor to Handel and Liszt. Handel's oratorios, he observed, were notable for the fact that their heroes did not choose their destinies; rather

> above them stands a higher power, Jehovah, the Almighty; He is the real master of destinies. He controls them invisibly, but we sense His nearness, we feel it from the roar of the mighty choruses, which become the real centrepieces of the whole thing, and grow powerfully in breadth. [. . .] the entirety is raised into the spheres of the sublime.[63]

With Handel the audience almost felt a sense of oneness with God, but Volbach argued (with possibly just a hint of anti-Semitism) that this was not a characteristic of Handel's most popular successor in England: 'None of his [Handel's] successors – least of all Mendelssohn – were capable of grasping the greatness and grandeur of this idea.'[64] The exception to this was Liszt; in works such as *Christus* (1856–66) there was 'no plot development in the sense that one would find in a drama, only great, large-scale pictures which are erected on the noble golden background of powerful choruses, standing one next to the other. But they are connected by one great sublime thought.'[65] The sublime in oratorio, as Volbach perceived it, was thus

[61] Neitzel, 'Die Apostel', 677: 'mystisch-katholische Betrachtungen [. . .] von deren [Elgar] schon im zweiten Teil des Gerontiustraumes soviel Belege gab'. According to Neitzel, Elgar 'in this respect goes considerably further than Liszt and Tinel, of whom the second still more than the first has remained in the forecourt of mysticism' ('geht hierin erheblich weiter als Liszt und Tinel, von den der zweite noch mehr als der erste im Vorhofe des Mystizismus stehen blieb'). Tinel's oratorio *St Francis* was performed at the Cardiff Festival in 1895, but received a mixed reception; the Special Correspondent of the *Musical Times* complained that the whole of the first part of the work concentrated on the worldly period of the saint's life, and that the third part made 'a pious end in a space of time remarkably brief by contrast with the prolonged lamentations raised above his remains and the jubilations with which his apotheosis is celebrated by way of *Finale*'. See 'Cardiff Musical Festival', *Musical Times* 36/632 (October 1895), 672–3 (p. 672).

[62] Neitzel, 'Die Apostel', 678: 'Grundsäulen der jedesmaligen Textstimmung'.

[63] Volbach, 'Edward Elgar', 318: 'über ihnen steht eine höhere Macht, Jehova, der Gewaltige. Er ist der wirkliche Lenker der Geschicke. Unsichtbar leitet er sie, aber wir ahnen seine Nähe, wir fühlen sie aus dem Brausen der mächtigen Chöre, die so zum eigentlichen Mittelpunkte des Ganzen werden, und mächtig in die Breite wachsen. [. . .] das Ganze ist emporgerückt in die Sphäre des Erhabenen'.

[64] *Ibid.*: 'Keiner seiner [Handel's] Nachfolger – am wenigsten Mendelssohn – vermochte die Größe und Erhabenheit dieser Idee zu fassen.'

[65] *Ibid.*: 'Keine Entwicklung einer Handlung im Sinne des Dramas; nur große, breit angelegte Bilder, die sich auf dem erhabenen Goldgrunde mächtiger Chöre aufbauen, stehen neben einander. Aber verbunden sind die durch einen großen erhabenen Gedanken.'

characterized by the avoidance of conventional drama; what plot there was existed almost beyond time, rather than within it. And it was this lack of dramatic development that Volbach sensed in Elgar's works, which, he claimed, were

> composed of individual scenes, broadly-sweeping pictures, without a continuous plot and held together by the idea of the invisible Divine and the Sublime. In *Gerontius*, the incorporeal Soul, fought over by the Angel and Demons, takes centre stage; we hear how strange, dreamlike sensations overcome the Soul as it flies between the world and eternity, anxiously expecting to stand before its Judge.[66]

It might appear that Volbach conceived of Elgar's oratorios as a sort of musical stream-of-consciousness. Such a conception would certainly be consistent with Hartmann's aforementioned definition of mysticism, in which feelings come from within rather than from dialectical procedures; thus Volbach's reading of Elgar's dramaturgy perceives the 'action' of *Gerontius* to be driven by the subconscious rather than by the rational mind. This is obviously an appropriate interpretation for a piece that depicts a dream, where the subconscious does not operate in a linear fashion, but through a process of selective memory that conflates events which may have no relationship to each other.[67] But the implications of Volbach's argument go further than this. For oratorio to be 'raised into the spheres of the sublime' suggests that it should be seen as analogous not to drama but to epic: a genre whose scale is larger than life, and whose heroes' great deeds exist as exemplars outside any sense of dramatic time. It is thus the opposite of opera, whose drama relies entirely on a sense of progress in time. *Gerontius*, a work in which the action takes place in a single moment in time, is clearly a piece within that epic tradition; as it was 'the idea of the invisible Divine and the Spiritual' that held it together, rather than 'continuous action', it was consequently 'conceivable only as oratorio'.[68]

It is surely no coincidence that at least one contemporary critic who found difficulties with *Gerontius* did so because he conceived of the work in terms that

[66] *Ibid.*, 318–19: 'setzen sich aus einzelnen Szenen zusammen, breit ausladenden Bildern, ohne fortlaufende Handlung, und zusammengesfaßt durch die Idee des unsichtbar Göttlichen, Erhabenen. Im Gerontius steht sogar die körperlose Seele, um die Engel und Dämonen streiten, im Mittelpunkte; eigenartige, traumhafte Empfindungen, wie sie die Seele befallen, während sie dahineilt zwischen Welt und Ewigkeit, bang erwartend, vor ihren Richter zu treten.'

[67] Cf. Percy Young's comment that 'being the pattern of a spiritual progress traced in a dream it was inaccessible as a narrative'. Young also draws attention to the fact that, besides the première of *Gerontius*, 1900 also saw the publication of Sigmund Freud's *Träumdeutung*. See Percy M. Young, *Elgar, Newman and The Dream of Gerontius: In The Tradition of English Catholicism* (Aldershot, 1995), xi.

[68] Volbach, 'Edward Elgar', 318: 'die Idee des unsichtbar Göttlichen, Erhabenen'; 'fortlausende Handlung'; 'nur als Oratorium denkbar'.

owed more to drama than to epic. Willy Seibert, reviewing the second Düsseldorf performance of *Gerontius* in *Die Musik*, was sometimes irritated by the work, because it seemed to lack the conventional dramatic teleology of a piece like *Tod und Verklärung*. Whilst acknowledging that the choruses were 'outstandingly beautiful and enthralling' ('hervorragend schön und packend') expressions of the poem's mystical atmosphere, he implied that they retarded the forward momentum of the piece. 'But the nature and intentions of the work mean that intensifications, as rendered in the motivically built-up choruses, are lacking', he complained. 'Lengthy scenes are constructed through the subordination of the musical idea to the content of each moment; these tire through the lack of contrasts, giving rise to a certain harmonic forcedness. In the second part of this enormously interesting work, this becomes almost disastrous.'[69] Characterization, in Seibert's eyes, meant following a protagonist's actions; for Volbach, by contrast, it meant a process of deepening that occurred through reflection. And Elgar brought about such a process, Volbach believed, through a use of leitmotif that went beyond mere reminiscence to recall Wagner. In the motifs of *The Apostles* and *The Kingdom*, 'the meaning of the emotions of the principal characters and crucial moments is more or less condensed. These occur throughout the work, sometimes combining ideas, sometimes deepening them, sometimes turning the attention back to what has happened, or looking prophetically into the future.'[70] Admittedly, in the two later works, which are set within an extensive timescale, leitmotifs can play an anticipatory and recollective role that they are denied in *Gerontius*. But we may infer that it is also possible to use a leitmotif system even in a work, like *Gerontius*, that is characterized by timelessness, in order to develop particular ideas psychologically.[71]

[69] Willy Seibert, 'Das 79. Niederrheinische Musikfest in Düsseldorf', *Die Musik*, 1/18 (June 1902), 1681: 'Es liegt aber in der Natur der Sache und der Absichten, dass Steigerungen, wie sie motivisch aufgebaute Chöre ergeben, ausbleiben und durch die Unterordnung der musikalischen Idee unter den jeweiligen Inhalt Längen entstehen, die durch das Fehlen der Kontraste, wozu noch eine gewisse harmonische Gequältheit kommt, ermüden. Das wird dem zweiten Teil des riesig interessanten Werkes fast verhängnisvoll.'

[70] Volbach, 'Edward Elgar', 321: 'sich der Empfindungsgehalt der Hauptcharaktere und Momente gewissermaßen verdichtet. Sie ziehen sich durch das Werk, die Gedanken bald verknüpfend, bald vertiefend, lenken den Blick zurück auf Geschehenes, weisen prophetisch verkündend in die Zukunft.'

[71] Like many of his contemporaries, Volbach understood 'leitmotif' to be more or less synonymous with what we know as a 'reminiscence theme', and not as a musical motif that formed the musical as well as the dramatic substance of music drama (see McGuire, *Elgar's Oratorios*, 84–6, for a useful summary of the changing definitions of 'leitmotif'). Given the number-like structures of *Gerontius* (alluded to in n. 45 above) and the two *Apostles* oratorios, Volbach's terminology is obviously wrong; yet his sense that Elgar's motifs could both deepen and anticipate ideas suggest that they were more than just dramatic props.

Conclusion: 'Novissima hora' revisited

The problematic relationship between drama and time in *Gerontius* has been raised by Stephen Banfield in a provocative article that considers whether *Gerontius* might be considered an unstaged opera.[72] There is no shortage of operatic gestures in Elgar's score: Banfield draws attention to the *mise en scène* of the dying man at the opening of Part I, the Scarpia-like summons of the Priest at the end of that Part, and the Parsifalian march that follows it. But, he concludes, there are major obstacles to conceiving of *Gerontius* as an *ersatz* opera, on account of the essentially unoperatic treatment of time in Part II. Whereas opera is characterized by temporal motion, *Gerontius* is characterized by temporal stasis; this is irrespective of whether we view Part II as an out-of-body experience, in which natural time is suspended, or as an inner commentary by the Soul on the events of Part I.[73] If we conceive of *Gerontius* as an epic oratorio, however, one in which narrative is not bound by the linearity of dramatic time, a possible solution may be offered to this.

Because its narrative is not subject to the unities of conventional drama, it is possible for Part II to be both out-of-body experience *and* inner commentary: a deepening of Part I rather than an addition to it. Instead of seeking a single dramatic thread that runs through the whole work, we may instead locate parallel threads in each part – threads that, as we have seen, follow the same tonal trajectory – and consider the two parts opposite sides of the same coin. At certain points, however, these two sides collide. Rehearsal figure 115 of Part II (see Example 5) sees the return of the friends' prayers for the dying soul: we hear the 'Rescue him' music from rehearsal figure 63 of Part I (bass, rehearsal figure 115:3), and the 'In the name of angels and archangels' music from rehearsal figure 72 of Part I (chorus, rehearsal figure 115:5). It is a simple reminder that, although an hour of musical time has elapsed since these passages last appeared, dramatic time has remained stationary. These are the same prayers as before; their restatement therefore represents a development of a single moment rather than a memory. We may view Part II as a trope of Part I: the confirmatory role played by the choruses in Part I against the fears and doubts of the dying man forms part of a dialectic of faith and doubt which the Soul's encounters with the demonic and the angelic choruses play out in a different (but dramatically simultaneous) context in Part II. It is as if we are viewing the same piece of sculpture, but from a different angle.

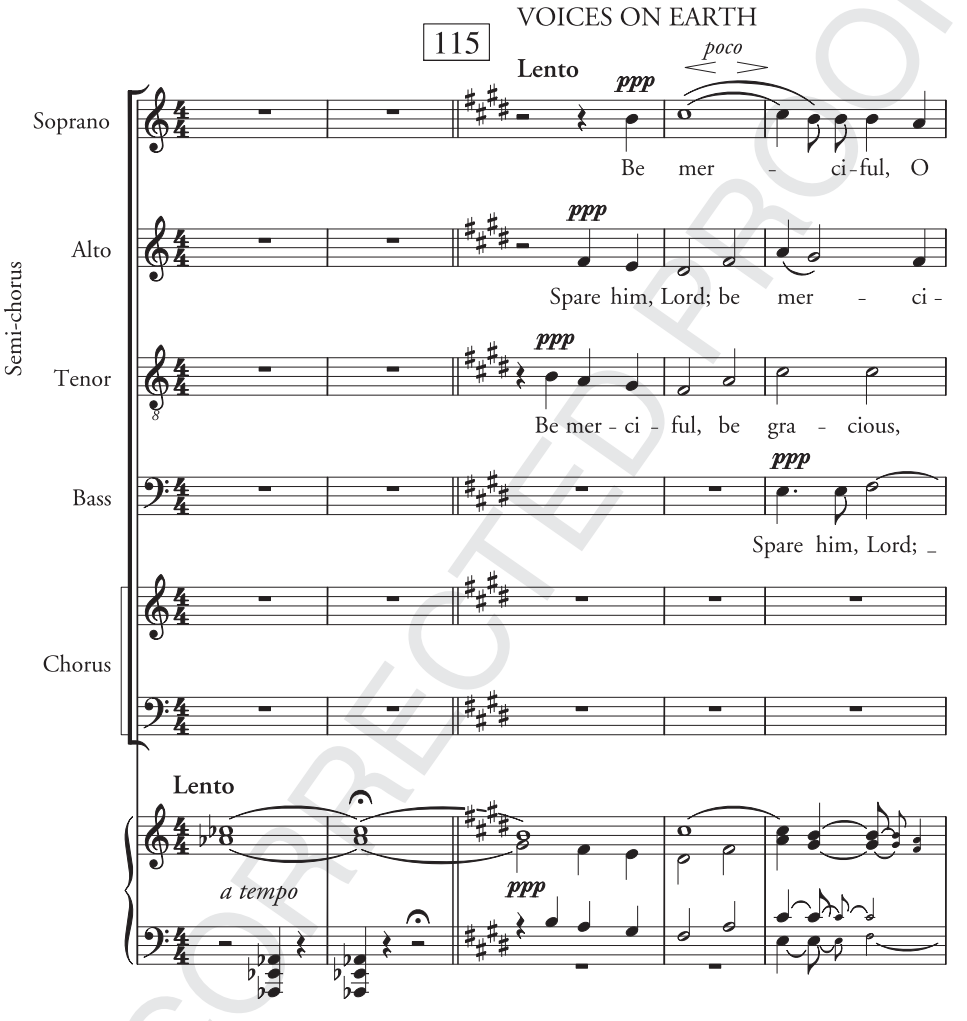
The relationship between the two Parts is reminiscent of what Lawrence Kramer has described as 'expressive doubling': 'a form of repetition in which alternative versions of the same pattern define a cardinal difference in perspective'.[74] Admittedly, the parallel is not an exact one. Expressive doubling is underpinned

[72] Stephen Banfield, '*The Dream of Gerontius* at 100: Elgar's Other Opera', *Musical Times*, 141 (2000), 23–31.

[73] *Ibid.*, 23, 27–9.

[74] Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice 1800–1900* (Berkeley, CA, 1990), 22.

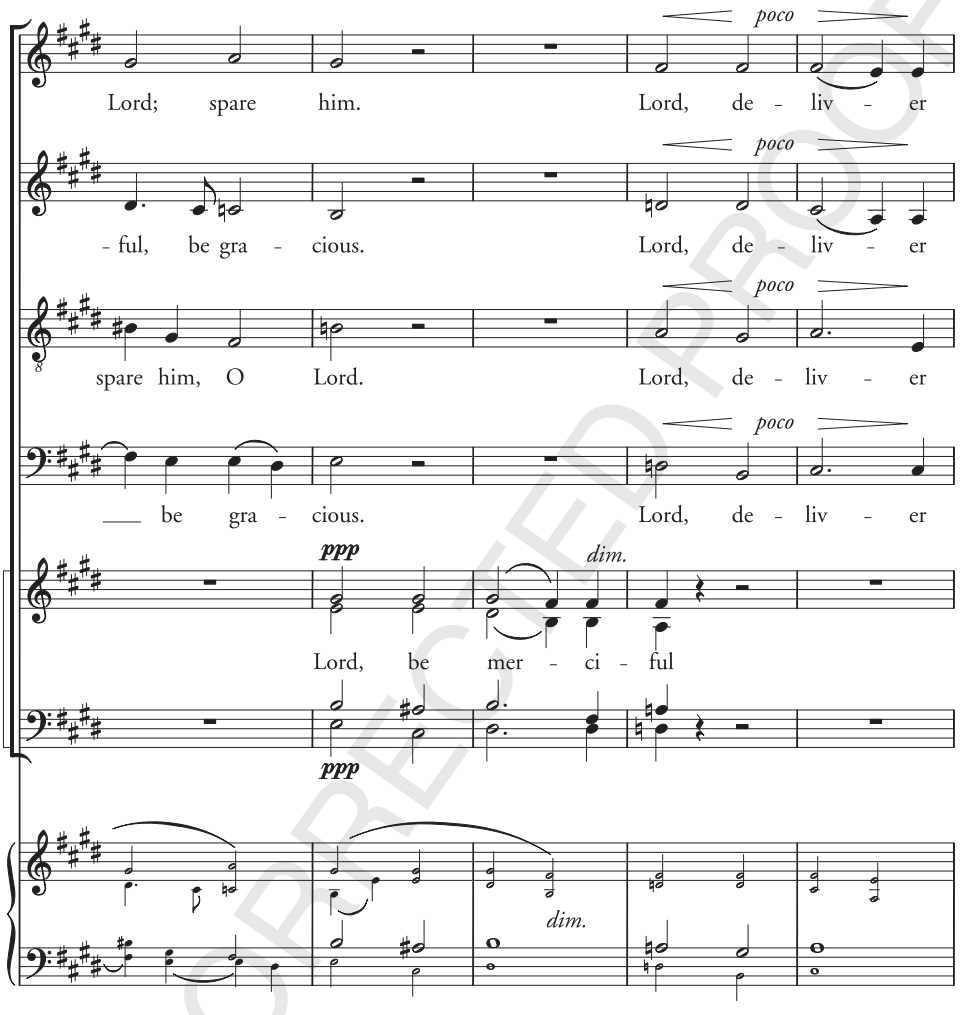
Example 5. Elgar, *The Dream of Gerontius*, Part II, rehearsal figures 114:7–116:1: recurrence of 'Rescue him' and 'In the name of angels and archangels' music.



by the Derridian idea of completing that which 'at first seems complete in itself' in a way 'that displaces – but does not nullify – the original term': hardly the case in *Gerontius*, where the prospect of divine judgment is established in Part I as a necessary goal for the work, but is not realized until the end of Part II. Moreover, 730
expressive doubling, Kramer notes, is associated with the utopian aesthetics and historical progress of early Romanticism: features notably absent from a work associated more with post-Wagnerian decadence.[75] On the other hand, one

[75] *Ibid.*, 24, 30; Kramer cites Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD, 1976), 141–64. For the connection between *Gerontius* and decadence, see n. 9 above.

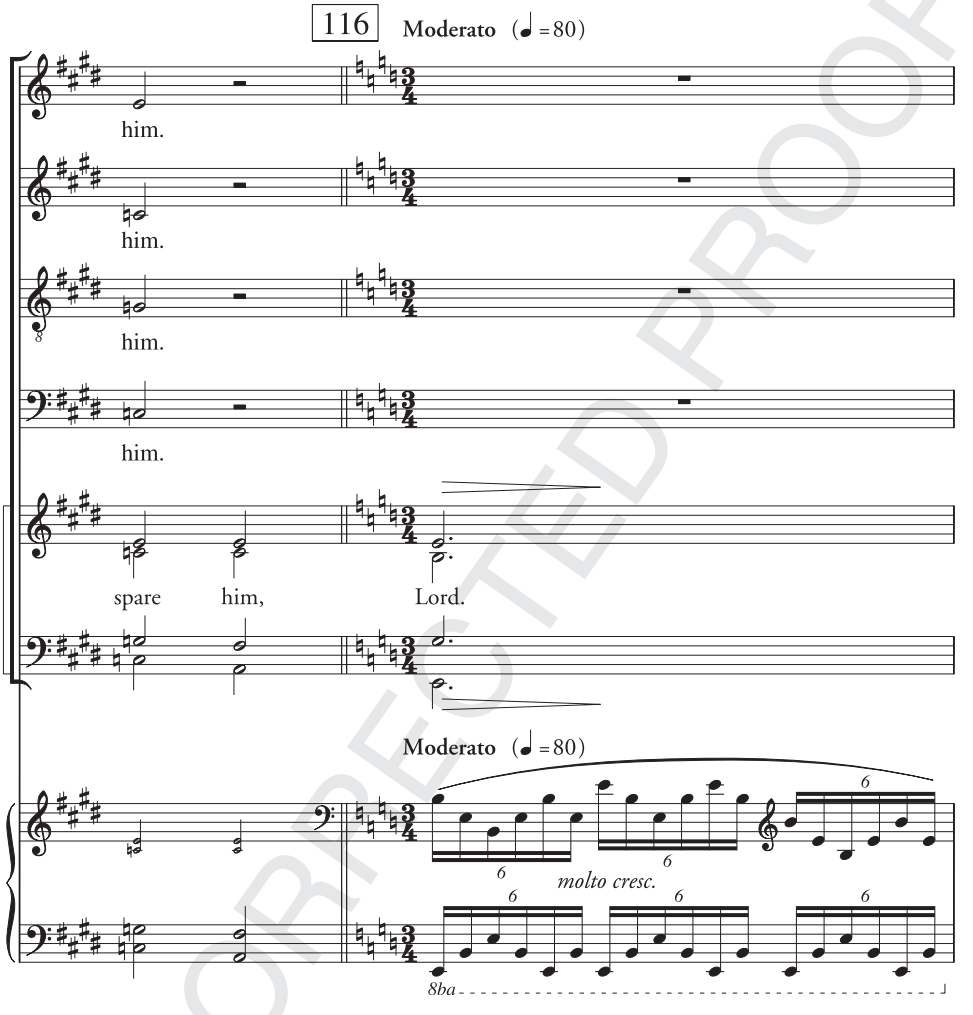
Example 5 (Continued)



manifestation of this utopianism was the transposition of the original term of an expressive doubling 'to a higher or deeper plane, a more brilliant or profound register'.[76] And it is perhaps this that best describes the relationship between Part I and Part II: mortal dying is transposed into judgment within a heavenly realm that, 'for a nineteenth century mystical Catholic [. . .] would probably [have] seem[ed] more real and important' – and thus merit being depicted more brilliantly or profoundly – 'than the mortal one'.[77]

[76] Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice*, 30.
[77] McGuire, *Elgar's Oratorios*, 133.

Example 5 (Continued)



Such a transposition is particularly apparent in the treatment of what Banfield calls the two 'supremely important moments' in the work: the death of Gerontius in Part I and the Soul's meeting with God in Part II.[78] These moments occur at roughly the same point in each Part, and, as we have already noted, are set to the same music ('Novissima hora') and in the same key (F♯ minor). Here again Part II tropes Part I: the process of physical dying in Part I is deepened psychologically to incorporate the shame and unworthiness felt by the Soul when faced with divine judgment. Moreover, this process of deepening continues at a musical level in the passage that follows. Unlike its equivalent in Part I, the Priest's 'Proficiscere' recitative, which

[78] Banfield, '*The Dream of Gerontius* at 100', 26.

shifts somewhat abruptly from B♭ to the D major of the ensuing march (rehearsal figure 70), the musical space after the final statement of 'Novissima hora' is resolved much more slowly, culminating in an extensive dominant pedal (rehearsal figure 125) and a structural perfect cadence at the start of the Angel's Farewell (rehearsal figure 126). The Soul is thus permitted time to reflect on its predicament as it prepares for its next journey.

The role played by the discourse on mysticism within the early criticism of *Gerontius* is thus profoundly significant both culturally and aesthetically. The subject matter of the work, and Elgar's sensitive treatment of it, enabled critics like Volbach and Hehemann to appropriate *Gerontius* as part of the artistic response to modernity taking place in contemporary Germany, in which mysticism played an important creative role, and thereby transplant Elgar's piece from the backwater of the English oratorio tradition to the heart of contemporary European music-making. Aesthetically, the centrality of mysticism to the plot of *Gerontius* gives us the chance to reconsider the role of time and drama within oratorio, to conceive of it as an epic rather than dramatic genre, and consequently to reinterpret the work as the unfolding of two simultaneous events, in which Elgar, to paraphrase Schoenberg, 'represents in slow motion everything that occurs during a single second of maximum spiritual excitement, stretching it out to [an hour and a half]'.[79] And because we, the listeners, may thus hear the piece unfold differently, the cultural and aesthetic associations of mysticism should be as relevant to our conception of the piece as they were to the critics who heard it in Düsseldorf over a century ago.

ABSTRACT

The popularity in Britain of Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* was triggered by the successful reception of the work in Germany in December 1901 and May 1902. By examining some of the writings on Elgar by German critics in this period, I explain that what may have particularly have appealed to German audiences was the composer's engagement with mysticism, something that as well as being a distinct strand of German theology since medieval times had acquired a new popularity among German artists in a number of fields, as part of a reaction to the materialism of Wilhelmine Germany. Through a reading of the work that takes into account both its Catholic theology and ideas of mysticism more generally, I propose that the two Parts of the work should be conceived as taking place simultaneously, rather than successively, and that the work is thus best understood as belonging to the genre of epic rather than drama.

[79] Arnold Schoenberg, 'New Music: My Music', *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein (London, 1975), 99–106 (p. 105).